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ABSTRACT

The Chicago School Reform Act of 1988 gave a Local School Council (LSC) strong powers not typically seen in such bodies. An overview of how this LSC has worked is offered here. The report draws primarily on the results of a survey of LSC members conducted between May 1995 and February 1996. It examined three primary areas: the background of LSC members, how LSCs operate and carry out their mandated functions, and the links between the LSC and the surrounding community. The six chapters here include an introduction, qualifications of LSC members to govern local schools, LSCs as viable governance institutions, a closer look at schools with problem councils, tips on listening to LSC members, and an interpretive summary. The study found that almost all LSC members quietly oversee school policy and carry out their official duties of evaluating the principal, approving the budget, and approving and monitoring the School Improvement Plan. Their most frequently cited contribution to the school is improving core academic programs, followed by improving the school's physical environment, improving attendance and discipline, and increasing parent involvement. Overall, the vast majority of LSCs operate as viable governance organizations that responsibly carry out their mandated duties and are active in building school and community partnerships. (RJM)

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ED 420 916

Charting Reform: LSCs— Local Leadership at Work

A Report Sponsored by the Consortium on Chicago School Research

December 1997

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This report reflects the interpretations of the authors. Although the Consortium's Steering Committee provided technical advice and reviewed an earlier version of this report, no formal endorsement by these individuals, their organizations, or the full Consortium should be assumed.

How This Study Was Conducted

This report draws primarily on the results of a survey of Local School Council members, conducted between May 1995 and February 1996. The LSC survey examined three primary areas: the background of LSC members, how LSCs operate and carry out their mandated functions, and the links between the LSC and the surrounding community.[1] The survey was available in English and Spanish. In a few instances when schools requested surveys in other languages such as Chinese and Polish, we encouraged bilingual council members to assist with translation. Surveys were distributed to all councils. A probability sample of schools, stratified by geographic location and the percent of low-income students enrolled, was also identified. Special efforts were made to ensure a good response rate for this probability sample. A total of 1,943 surveys were returned from 325 schools. Of the 111 schools in the probability sample, we received surveys from 107 schools. Of these, 76 percent included a returned survey from both the principal and the chairperson.

In May 1995 as these data were being collected, the Illinois legislature passed another major Chicago school reform bill. The act gave substantial powers and responsibilities to Chicago's mayor for control over the policies and central administration of the school system, including direct mayoral appointment of the Chicago School Reform Board of Trustees and the power to appoint a Chief Executive Officer for the Chicago Public Schools. While the new law gave the Board of Trustees authority to intervene in non-performing schools and required training for LSC members, it left the Local School Councils and their authority intact. One key action of the new Board of Trustees was to place Local School Council members under one of the most stringent ethics policies in effect for any elected official in Illinois. The policy prohibits schools from hiring the relatives of LSC members and prohibits LSC members from voting on or attempting to influence any LSC or school decision that would benefit them financially. The data for this study were collected before the new Board of Trustees initiatives for required training and ethics standards were put in place and before the most recent LSC election in spring 1996.

Because of a concern about possible non-response bias, we compared the probability sample, the volunteer sample, and the non-responding schools. We found no significant differences across these groups in basic school characteristics, including where schools were located and the types of students enrolled. As a result, we believe the data presented here broadly represent the system as a whole. We rely on data from all surveys when we report general background information about council members and analyze differences among councils.[2] However, in reporting statistics on individual items and measures, such as "the percentage of LSC members who . . . " we use data from the probability sample only.

As a further check on the consistency of survey reports, we compared the responses of different subgroups of LSC members for each item and measure. For example, teachers' and principals' views were contrasted with those from parents and community members. In general, survey responses were quite similar regardless of the particular role of the respondent. (The few exceptions are specifically noted in the text.) We also drew on the Consortium's 1994 survey of 8,800 teachers from elementary and high schools to determine whether teachers' perceptions about the LSC confirmed LSC members' self reports. Here, too, we found remarkable consistency. These results further increase our confidence about the overall validity of the findings reported here.

I.

Introduction

The Chicago School Reform Act of 1988 remains one of the boldest attempts anywhere to overhaul an urban school system. It banked on expanded local participation of parents, community members, and school professionals to initiate systemwide reform. The Act required each school to elect a Local School Council with a majority of parents and community representatives. Mindful that local councils could easily become marginalized, the framers of the 1988 Reform Act gave LSCs strong powers to hire and fire the principal and approve the budget and a School Improvement Plan. Such authority is vastly different from most other school districts engaged in school-based management, where the superintendent hires the principal, and local councils have, at best, a mostly advisory role. Although the 1988 Chicago School Reform Act was a long and complex law that included many provisions designed to upgrade schools, shifting major authority to the schools was the heart of the legislation, and Local School Councils were central to this shift of authority.

The 1988 Reform Act has not been without controversy. While proponents of the reform envisioned increased local activism pressing for stronger school leadership, more parent and community involvement,

improved facilities, safety and order, and sustained attention to advancing teaching and learning, some were not so sanguine. Since the first mobilization for Local School Council elections, questions have been raised about whether parents and community representatives, particularly in the poorest neighborhoods, would have the capacity and interest to govern their schools. More recently, this theme has been revived because of news headlines about specific LSCs misusing their authority by firing good principals, inappropriately allocating school discretionary funds, and pressuring teachers to change their children's grades. Although the documented problem cases are few, they have received much attention and shape the public's perceptions about the value of local governance.

Chicago's schools have operated under local governance for eight years. Councils have been effectively institutionalized in some schools, but not in others. While there are many positive reports and strong advocates for local governance, there are also some disquieting accounts of problems. Critical questions persist regarding the worthiness of this central element of the 1988 Reform Act. It is now time to take a more systematic look.

What Is Local Governance?

Since the late 1980s, local control of schools has become an increasingly common strategy for improving public education. One-third of the school districts in the United States have implemented some kind of school-based management.[3] The term "school-based management" is broad, encompassing a variety of forms of decentralization and shared decision making. In some school systems, principals share decision making with teachers. In other systems, school-based management has primarily empowered the school principal to make more substantive local decisions. Unlike in Chicago, parents and community members are frequently relegated to an advisory role in many school-based management plans. Also, in most other systems, much less authority is devolved to the local schools. Typically, the school controls less of its budget and has a more minor role in school improvement plans and personnel selection. Chicago's reform remains closely watched because each public school has been granted more authority over key resources and decisions than in any other school-based management experiment.

In general, proponents of local control argue that once the constraints imposed by a centralized authority have been removed, local stakeholders are free to devise and carry out better decisions uniquely suited for a particular school.[4] Proponents also argue that LSCs can serve as a training ground where members acquire and refine decision-making skills and develop a commitment to civic participation, increasing the scarce "social capital" of urban neighborhoods.[5] The long-term effectiveness of such reforms, however, remains uncertain. Although there is some empirical evidence linking school-based management to improved academic performance and other benefits,[6] many initiatives have been relatively short lived, have had only modest authority, and have not been subjected to any rigorous study.[7]

II.

How Qualified Are Parents and Community LSC Members to Govern Local Schools?

The 1988 Chicago School Reform Act placed considerable responsibility on the shoulders of parent and community members on Local School Councils. These individuals, who hold eight of eleven council positions, must be well-informed and exercise good judgment to tackle difficult issues such as choosing a new principal or making budget decisions. They also need to recognize the difference and respect the boundary between setting policy and micromanaging the school staff. A major concern from the beginning was whether knowledgeable, qualified parents and community representatives would come forward to serve on LSCs.

To investigate this issue, we examined LSC members' backgrounds, the training they received as council members, the amount of time spent on the LSC and around the school, and the ties they had to other local organizations that could help the school. We also asked all council members, including the principal and two teacher representatives, to assess their LSCs' skills, commitment, and capacity to govern. While each piece of information is only part of a larger picture, together these data afford a good view of the overall quality of human resources on school councils.

Who Serves on LSCs?

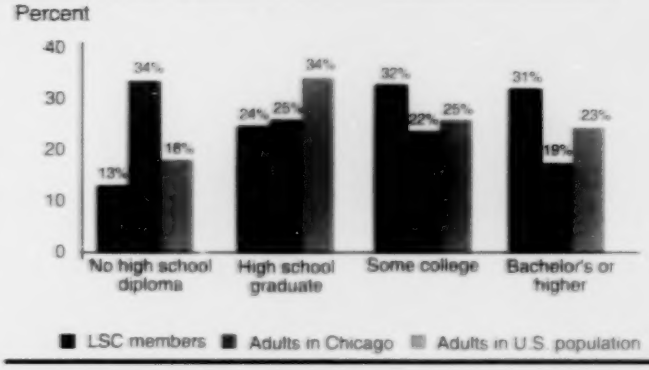
Each LSC consists of six parent representatives and two community representatives, elected by parents and community residents; two teachers, elected by the school staff; the school's principal; and (in high schools) an elected student. The LSC chair must be one of the six parent representatives. In Chicago's 540 public schools with elected LSCs, approximately 3,240 parents, 1,080 community residents, 1,080 teachers, and 540 principals serve on LSCs. LSC elections have occurred every two school years, and have taken place in fall 1989, fall 1991, fall 1993, and spring 1996. The next election is set for April 1998.[1]

Education

In general, the level of educational attainment of parent and community representatives on LSCs is significantly higher than that of the general Chicago population (see Table 1).[2] More than 60 percent of the parents and community representatives have at least some college education, and nearly one-third have a bachelor's or advanced degree. Only 13 percent have less than a high school education as compared to a third of the city's population. Community representatives have a higher level of education than parents, with 42 percent having at least a bachelor's degree compared with slightly more than one-third of the chairpersons and a quarter of the parents (see Table 2).

We also examined the educational attainment of LSC parent and community members for schools enrolling different percentages of low-income students. In schools with over 90 percent low-income students, the educational level of LSC members is lower than in schools where fewer than half of the students are from low-income families (see Table 3). In schools with less than half low-income students, almost two-thirds of the LSC members have a bachelor's degree or more, compared with 13 percent of the LSC members for schools with more than 90 percent low-income students. At the same time, only 1 percent of the LSC members in the least impoverished schools have less than a high school education, compared with one-quarter in the most impoverished schools. These differences notwithstanding, it is

LSC Parents and Community Representatives Are Relatively Well Educated Table 1



Educational Level by Role Table 2

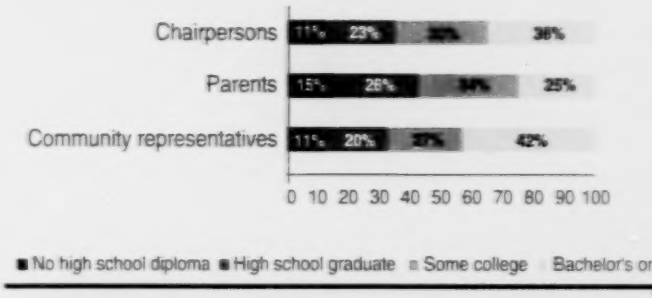
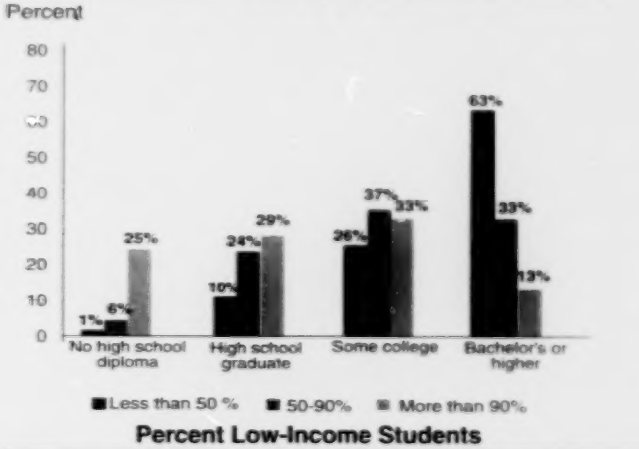


Table 3

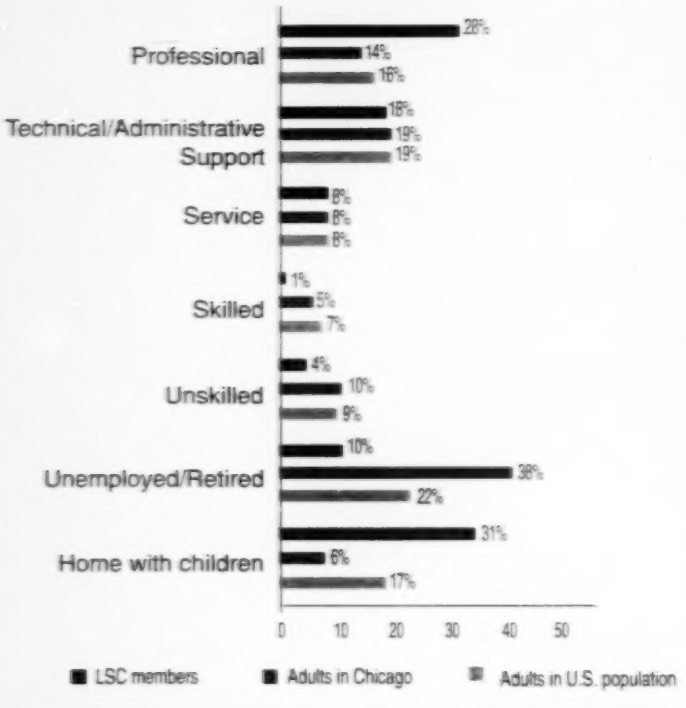
LSC Members Who Serve in Schools with Fewer Low-Income Students are Better Educated

Parents and Community Representatives



LSC Parents and Community Representatives Have A High Occupational Status

Table 4



Note: **Professional** includes engineering, teaching, or nursing. **Technical/administrative support** includes sales representatives, claims adjustors, or administrative assistants. **Service** includes workers in day care, restaurants, security, or cleaning services. Occupations such as farming, forestry, fishing, and armed forces account for 2 percent of the U.S. population and zero percent of the LSC members and Chicago population.

also important to recognize that even in schools with virtually all low-income students, the education level of LSC members is almost equal to that of the general Chicago population.

Occupation

Overall, parents and community representatives serving on LSCs have a higher occupational status compared to the city and U.S. average. More than a quarter work in a professional occupation such as engineering, teaching, or nursing (see Table 4).[3] Eighteen percent are in technical/sales/administrative support positions, such as claims adjustors or administrative assistants; 8 percent are employed in the service industry, including workers in day care, restaurants, security, and cleaning services, as well as self-employed; 1 percent work in skilled positions such as precision production, craft, carpentry, and repair occupations; and 4 percent work in unskilled occupations, including factory workers and truck drivers. Ten percent report being unemployed. A large portion, 31 percent, state they stay home to care for their children.

It is not surprising, given their higher education levels, that community representatives are also more likely to have a professional occupation (38 percent) than either chairpersons (27 percent) or parents (25 percent) (see Table 5). A substantial portion of the community representatives are also older and retired from active work.[4]

LSC Members' Knowledge, Training, and Experiences

Because councils can wield considerable influence over school policy, we were interested in the skills, knowledge, and experiences that parent and community members bring to their LSC work. We asked them about their involvement in the school, length of service on the LSC, participation in other organizations outside the school, and LSC training. Each of these factors contributes to the capacity of LSC members to make informed decisions.

Knowledge of the school. The more time parent and community members spend in the school, the more occasions they have for informal discussions with students, parents, and school staff that can inform them about the school.

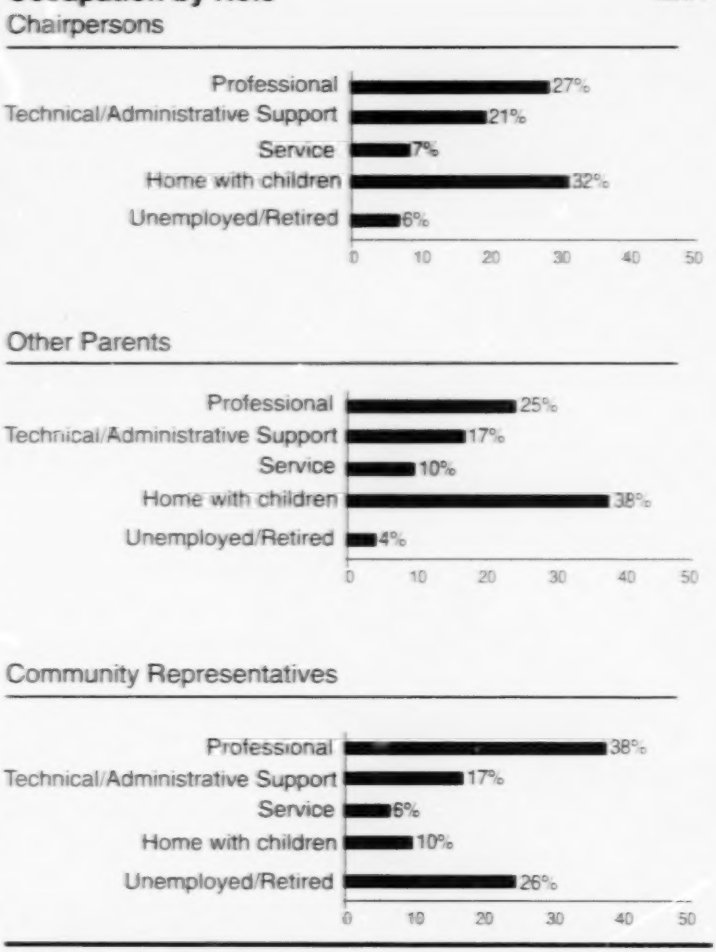
Consequently, we asked them to list how many hours they spent monthly at the school, both for formal LSC duties and for other activities. We view this time commitment as a good proxy for LSC members' specific knowledge about the school, its problems, and improvement needs. For formal LSC duties, half the parent and community members report spending five to ten hours a month at school (see Table 6). Seventeen percent spend four or fewer hours; 20 percent spend eleven to twenty hours; and the remaining 13 percent spend twenty-one hours or more.

Time spent beyond formal LSC duties includes volunteering, attending school committee meetings, participating in or attending extracurricular events, and serving on the PTA. Almost half the parent and community members on the LSC report spending more than 10 hours a month on such school work (see Table 7). A third spend over 20 hours a month. Considering that this is on top of their regular LSC duties, parent and community members are clearly making a significant time commitment to their schools.

Length of service on the LSC. It is difficult to envision a school sustaining a long-term focus on improvement without some stability in its council membership. Thus, another key indicator of an LSC's capacity is the length of council members' tenure. By law, community representatives may serve as long as they are re-elected to the council and continue to live in the area, whereas parents must resign if their children graduate or transfer out of the school.

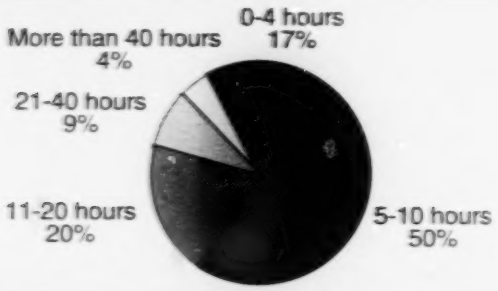
Forty-three percent of the parent and community members have served on the LSC three or more years. This figure suggests that a substantial portion are experienced in the procedures and duties of the LSC and are more likely to be informed about the issues facing the school. Chairpersons and community representatives have the longest tenure, with almost 60 percent of chairpersons and half of the community representatives serving three years or more (see Table 8). Al-

Occupation by Role Table 5

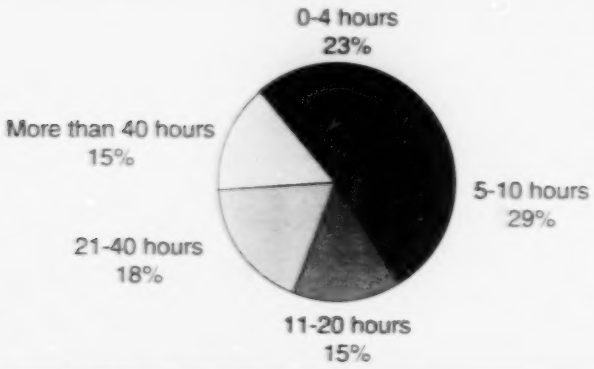


Note: The categories in each of the above three charts do not add up to 100 percent because the skilled and unskilled categories are not included.

Hours per Month LSC Members Spend on Official Duties Table 6
Parents and Community Representatives



Hours per Month LSC Members Spend in School beyond Regular LSC Work Table 7
Parents and Community Representatives



Note: These hours reflect time spent in other meetings, school events, volunteering, and P.T.A.

though the survey was conducted two years into the normal term of membership, nearly a third of the parent members had less than two years' experience. This compares with nearly one-quarter of the community representatives and 11 percent of the chairpersons. Presumably, these individuals had been added to their respective councils to fill vacancies that had occurred since the last election.

Involvement in the community. Over two-thirds of the parent and community members regularly participate in other organizations in their community, including: religious institutions (70 percent), community groups (66 percent), professional organizations (61 percent), charitable work (58 percent), and social service organizations (46 percent). These ties are valuable to schools for two reasons. First, individuals may acquire useful skills through these other organizational experiences that may benefit their work on the LSC. They may, for example, learn how to run meetings better and how to work effectively in a group. Second, members can use their connections with these organizations to obtain information, garner resources and, in some instances, facilitate partnerships between the school and a community group.

Training of LSC members. At the time the survey was administered, LSC members were encouraged, but not required, to obtain LSC training. The law has since changed, and new LSC members must receive eighteen hours of training. Even when training was voluntary, most LSC members received some preparation in the essential areas of LSC roles and responsibilities, principal evaluation, the School Improvement Plan, and the school budget (see Table 9). Less common topics included analyzing achievement data, good educational practices, and school and community partnerships. Even here, about half of all LSC members indicated receiving at least some exposure.

LSC members received their training from a wide spectrum of sources. The most common providers were the principal, school reform groups, and the Board of Education. Nearly 60 percent of the parents and community representatives report that they received some training from each of these three groups. LSC members feel that training from the principal was the most useful. This is not surprising because the principal can tailor the training to the particular needs of

the council. While a majority of council members believe their training was adequate, 40 percent report that they did not receive enough preparation to do their job well. Thus, the provision in the 1995 legislation to expand training and require it for all incoming LSC members seems well-founded.

Race and Ethnicity

In general, council membership more closely resembles the racial and ethnic composition of the city than the student population does (see Table 10). Forty-two percent of all LSC members are African-American, compared to 55 percent of the students enrolled. Whites comprise 40 percent of the total LSC members (but only 11 percent of the student population), and Hispanics about 14 percent (compared to 31 percent of the students). With respect to parent members on the LSC, African-Americans make up 42 percent, Hispanics 19 percent, and whites 34 percent (see Table 11). Forty-seven percent of the community representatives are white, which is quite a bit higher than for parent members.

The racial/ethnic composition of individual councils tends to resemble the race and ethnicity of the students in the schools. There are exceptions, however, especially in integrated schools where whites account for 85 percent (see Table 12) of the parents and community representatives on the LSC, but average only about half of the student

Years on the LSC by Role Table 8

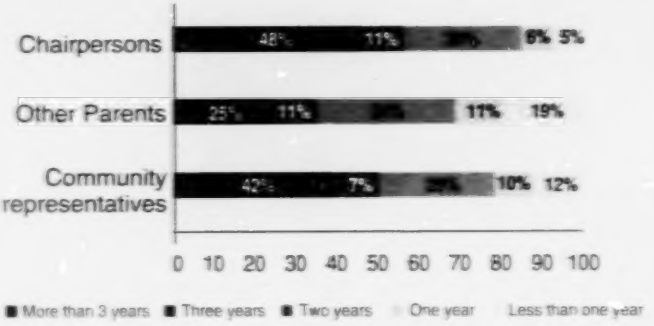


Table 9

Has Your LSC Had Training in Any of the Following?
Percent Reporting "Yes"
Principals, Teachers, Parents, Community Representatives

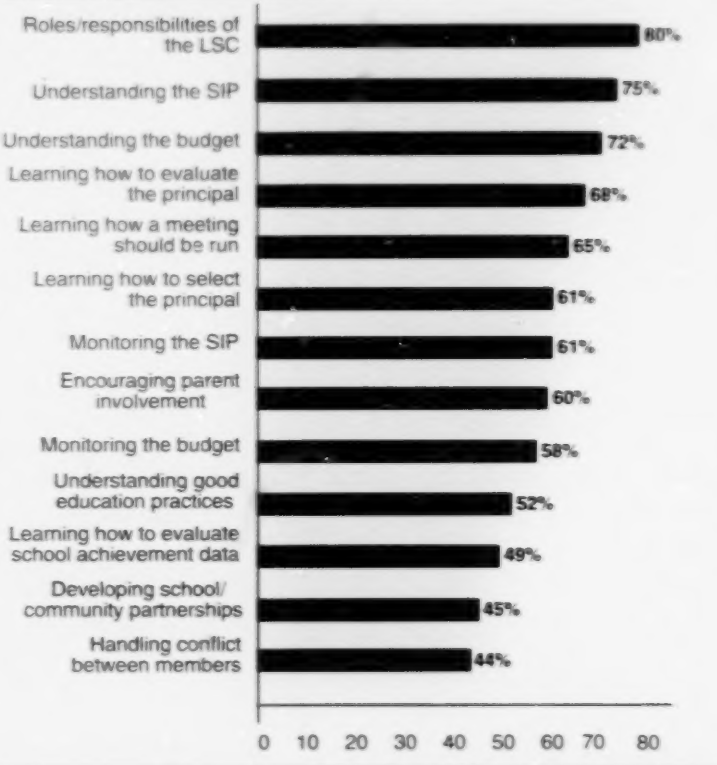
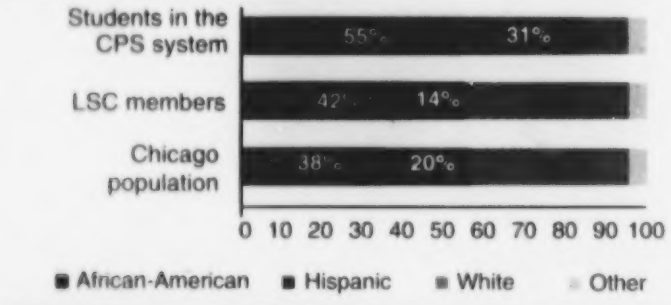


Table 10

Race and Ethnicity of Students, LSC Members, and the Chicago Population



Race and Ethnicity by Role

Table 11

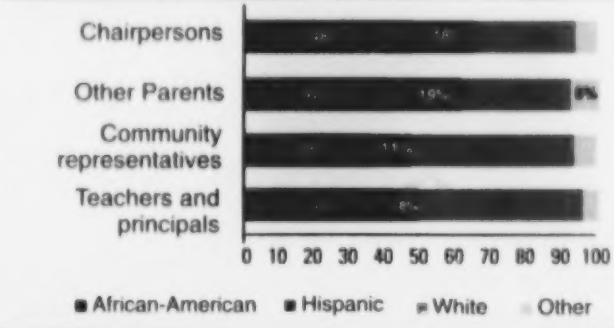
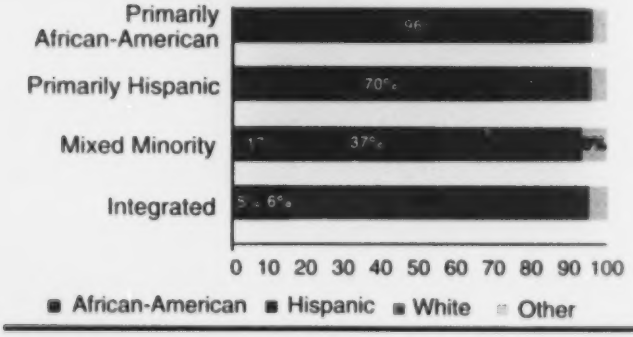


Table 12

Race and Ethnicity of Parents and Community Representatives on the LSC by Racial Composition of Students in School

Schools where the students are . . .



Note: Due to limited space, numbers below 5 percent are not shown.

body. White LSC members are also overrepresented in the predominately Hispanic schools.

To be sure, race and ethnicity do not constitute a qualification to govern. Nonetheless, we judge these results noteworthy. Taken together with the findings about education and occupation levels of parent and community members, the institution of Local School Councils has had two remarkable effects. First, it has allowed approximately 1,800 African-American parents and community residents and 700 Latino parents and community residents to serve as elected officials and to gain the skills associated with this experience. They represent an overwhelming percentage of the minority elected public officials in Illinois. Second, the Local School Councils have expanded the engagement of

*Schools were classified into four racial and ethnic groups depending on the composition of the student body: **Primarily African-American** is more than 85 percent African-American; **Primarily Hispanic** is more than 85 percent Hispanic; **Integrated** is more than 30 percent White; **Mixed Minority** is less than 30 percent white, with other students coming from various minority groups.*

the middle class and white population in the Chicago Public Schools. Considering that the school system historically has been highly segregated by both race and social class, this is a noteworthy development.

Qualifications and Experiences of LSC Chairpersons

We know from previous research that chairperson leadership is a key ingredient in an effective Local School Council.[3] A good chair, working in partnership with a good principal, can focus council efforts and those of the larger school community on meaningful educational improvements. For this reason, we specifically scrutinized the qualifications of LSC chairs as an indicator of the overall leadership capacity within the LSCs.

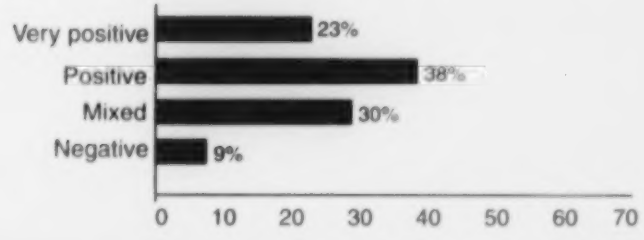
In general, chairpersons typically appear among the most qualified of the parent members on an LSC. For example, chairpersons are more likely to have a college degree and a professional occupation. (More than a third of the chairpersons have at least a bachelor's degree compared to a quarter of the other LSC parents.) Chairpersons also have received more extensive training compared to other parents on the council. They are likely to spend somewhat more time in the schools unrelated to their LSC activities, and they have had a longer tenure on the LSC. Almost half of the chairpersons have served for more than three years, compared to one-quarter of the other parents on the LSC. Although none of these demographic facts by themselves implies a capacity for genuine leadership, they do suggest, at a minimum, that council members are evaluating the usual indicators of experience and expertise in choosing their own leadership.

Members' Self-Assessments

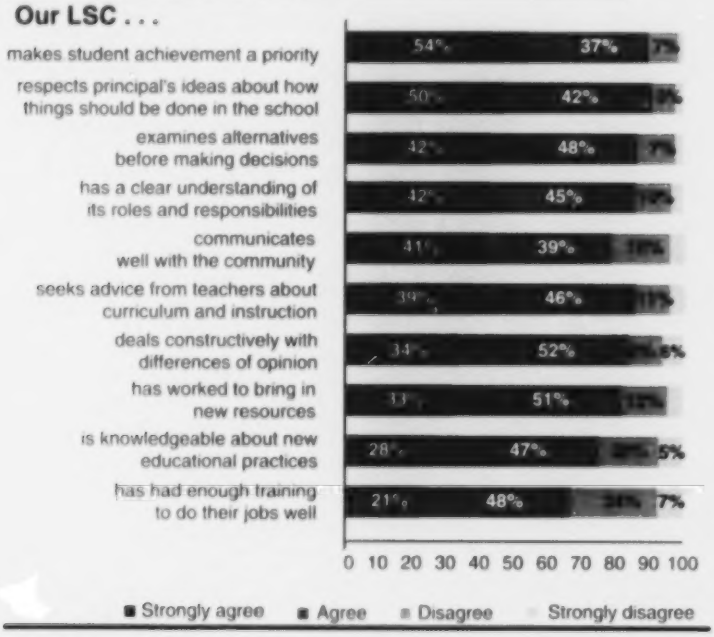
In addition to considering formal qualifications and preparation for LSC work, we also asked LSC members to offer their own assessments about how well they conduct their work. For this aspect of our analysis, we considered responses from all LSC members, including principals and teachers, as well as parents and community representatives. Given the initial opposition to the 1988 Reform Act by the Principals Association and the uncertain embrace by the Chicago Teachers Union, we had anticipated that the principal and teacher members might register somewhat more negative views than parents and community representatives. We were surprised to find this was not true.

Capacity to govern. In order to summarize how LSC members view their councils' organizational capac-

Members' Views of LSCs' Capacity to Govern Table 13
Principals, Teachers, Parents, Community Representatives



Selected Questions About Members' Views of LSCs' Capacity to Govern Table 14
Principals, Teachers, Parents, Community Representatives



Note: Due to limited space, numbers below 5 percent are not shown.

ity, we created a scale based on their responses to eighteen questions relating to the councils' capacity to govern. The scale combines responses to the questions, on topics including good organizational processes, positive group dynamics, and cooperation with teachers and the community in advancing school improvement. At one end

Note: Approximately 90 percent of the LSC members agree or strongly agree that their council examines alternatives before making decisions and that the LSC has a clear understanding of its roles and responsibilities. More than 80 percent of the members believe that the LSC seeks advice from teachers and that members work hard to bring in new resources.

In general, the responses of the principal and the two teacher representatives are similar to those of the parents and community representatives. They do differ, however, on one key item: "LSC is knowledgeable about new educational practices." Although 80 percent of the parents and community representatives report that the LSC knows about new educational practices, only 60 percent of the principals report that this is the case. It is not surprising that a discrepancy arises when we focus explicitly on knowledge about teaching and learning practices. Even parents and community representatives with a professional background can come up short on this topic.

of the scale are members who offer *very positive* assessments of their council's organizational capacity. Nearly a quarter of the LSC members fit into this group (see Table 13). They strongly agree that their council is both well organized and proactive. Another 38 percent of the LSC members offer *positive* endorsements in that they tend to agree, but not strongly agree, with each of the questions asked. About 30 percent of the council members offer a more *mixed* view of LSC capacity. They tend to agree that their LSC has good intentions and is competent but do not see the council as proactive in efforts to bring changes to the school. These LSCs mainly support initiatives that bubble up from the principal and faculty but do not take the initiative themselves. Less than 10 percent of the respondents offer a clearly *negative* view of the councils. They disagree or strongly disagree with all the questions we asked regarding LSC capacity (see Table 14 for selected questions). This small subgroup views their LSC as truly problematic and lacking a basic capacity to govern.

Lack of skills, commitment, and support. We also asked LSC members a range of questions about specific problems that might plague their LSC, such as poor attendance, inability to conduct meetings, a lack of commitment, and inadequate technical support. Nearly half of the members report that their LSC has *no problems* in any of these areas (see Table 15). These councils conduct business in an appropriate fashion, and no serious conflict exists among members. About 40 percent report that their LSC has some *minor problems*. Although member attendance and commitment are not issues, a lack of training, technical support, and effective meeting skills is sometimes a problem. Thirteen percent of the council members believe that the overall level of commitment and skills poses *some serious problems* for their LSC (see Table 16 for selected questions that comprise the scale).

Table 15

LSC Problems with Skills, Commitment, and Support
Principals, Teachers, Parents, Community Representatives

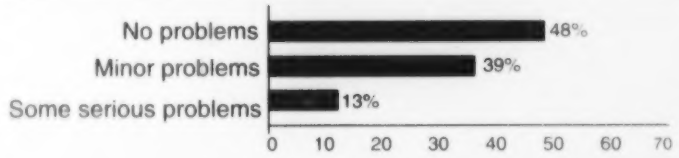
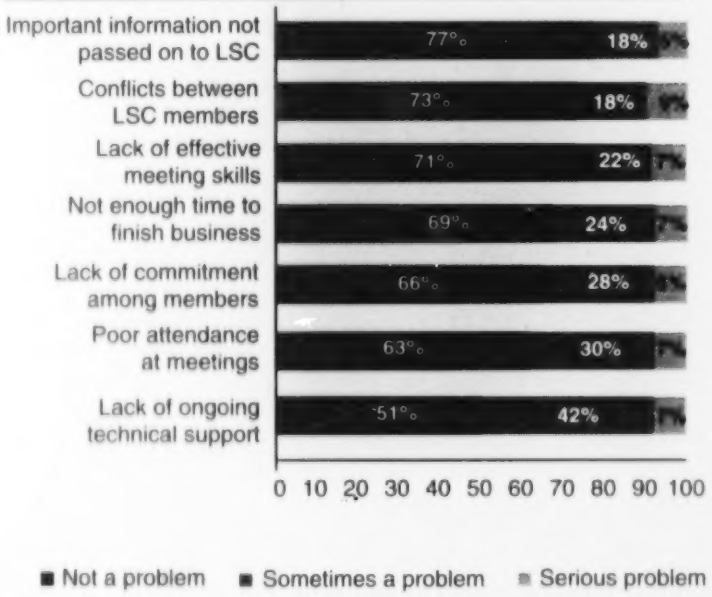


Table 16

Selected Questions about LSC Problems with Skills, Commitment, and Support
Principals, Teachers, Parents, Community Representatives



The most important finding in our analysis of LSC members' self assessments indicates little variation among teachers, principals, parents, and community representatives in

how they view their council's capacity. The principals and teachers, and parent and community representatives on the LSC offer very similar evaluations of their groups' efforts. Because principals and teachers are naturally uneasy about sharing power with parent and community members, their generally positive endorsements of the councils' work lends additional credibility to these self-reports.

Looking across the two self-assessment scales (capacity to govern and LSC problems) provides a first glimpse at a general finding that runs through the multiple analyses presented in this report: Three distinct levels of functioning exist among LSCs in Chicago. Approximately 50 to 60 percent of the LSCs appear to be relatively high functioning. They follow good processes, work well with local constituencies, have considerable internal capacity, and are, by their own accounts, a proactive force for improvement in their school communities. Another quarter to a third share some of these characteristics. They tend to support the initiatives of the school staff, but are less likely to be proactive. Reports about a need for more training and technical assistance are commonplace within this second group. The remainder, about 10-15 percent of the LSCs, report more serious problems. Our data raise questions about the current capacity of these councils for self governance.

* * * * *

The results presented in this section run counter to many popular perceptions about LSCs. For the most part, council members are better educated and have higher occupational status than the average adult population in Chicago. They also spend many hours in their schools and are active in their local communities. This is especially true for LSC chairpersons. Moreover, school professionals on the LSCs typically offer positive assessments about their LSCs' capacity to govern. While there are problems in some individual councils, in general we find no evidence that parent and community members lack basic background qualifications to govern a local school. Thousands of dedicated and committed individuals appear to have been drawn into this work.

III.

Are LSCs Viable Governance Institutions?

Administering the survey required Consortium staff to attend numerous meetings of Local School Councils. In the process, we had opportunities to observe many councils in operation. Some LSCs, like the schools they represent, have seized the opportunities afforded by the 1988 Reform Act, but others have not. Notes from two meetings highlight two ends of the continuum.

* * * * *

MAXWELL LOCAL SCHOOL COUNCIL MEETING

The LSC meeting at Maxwell was slated to begin at 1:30 p.m. Members present at the designated start time included the chairperson, one teacher representative, the principal, and one parent. Another parent entered ten minutes later and another arrived 25 minutes into the meeting. After that parent arrived, the principal signaled to the chairperson to call the meeting to order. The chair read each agenda item, then looked to the principal to take over. The principal, in turn, reviewed correspondence and announced upcoming school events. The director from the nearby Boys and Girls Club made a presentation. Only one member asked a question. At 2:25 the few parents at the meeting gathered their belongings and left to meet their children for the 2:30 dismissal. The principal told the chairperson to adjourn the meeting. The council meeting ended as it started with the principal, the chairperson, one teacher, and one parent still in attendance. No decisions were made, no votes taken.

VAN BUREN LOCAL SCHOOL COUNCIL MEETING

As members filtered into the gym, they picked up their LSC folders with announcements of upcoming school events, training opportunities, articles about the validity of achievement test scores, and summaries of proposals that would be discussed and voted on. Some members skimmed through the materials while others chatted about their children's after-school activities. Two members expressed concern about an increase in gang-related graffiti in the neighborhood. The LSC meeting began at 7:35 p.m., five minutes after the scheduled start. Nine members were present, another member came in a few minutes later, and one absent member had phoned the chairperson earlier explaining her absence. The chairperson moved comfortably between agenda items. She summarized correspondence, passed letters around, and asked members to read through those that were of interest to them. Several members asked questions that the principal and chairperson addressed in a thoughtful manner. When the discussion veered off to an unrelated matter, the chairperson brought the focus back to the topic.

Updates were given by several council members who led committees. One member reported on the playground equipment that inspectors deemed unsafe. The LSC members thought about ways to have it repaired or replaced. A parent remarked on the city play lot nearby and how the children love the jungle gyms made out of durable plastic. Another member gave a report on an upcoming survey of parents regarding a proposal to have school uniforms, and the teacher representative reviewed the budget for staff development.

The primary topic of the meeting was reviewing the procedures for evaluating the principal. The head of the principal evaluation committee outlined various proposals for the evaluation and noted the advantages and disadvantages of each. The LSC discussed the process and the instrument used for the evaluation. One teacher representative voiced her disapproval about excluding some teachers from the process. The LSC resolved the issue by deciding that teachers could serve on the committee, but they would have to notify the committee beforehand and come to all meetings. The discussion lasted for

How Often Do LSCs Meet?

In order to gauge the activity level of the average LSC, we asked chairpersons several questions about the frequency and length of council meetings over the school year. In cases where the chairperson had been at the school less than a year, we used the principal's responses instead.

The responses show that, on average, LSCs meet at least once a month during the school year. The meetings last from one-and-a-half to two hours, and a quorum is usually present. In addition, the average council has four to six active committees, defined as those that meet at least three times per year.

Meetings Held 1994-1995		**Average Length of Meetings**	
6 or fewer	1%	Less than 1 hour	1%
7-8	12%	1 to 1 1/2 hours	26%
9-10	41%	1 1/2 to 2 hours	49%
11-12	21%	More than 2 hours	25%
More than 12	26%		

Meetings with No Quorum 1994-1995		**Number of Active Committees**	
None	56%	0-1	19%
1-2	35%	2-3	23%
3-4	6%	4-6	31%
More than 4	3%	More than 6	27%

forty minutes with every member offering at least some comments. At the end of the discussion, the chairperson summarized the decisions and reviewed tasks that needed to be done. She first asked for volunteers and then directly requested members to take on some extra work. After the last item on the agenda was discussed, the chairperson reminded the council of the next LSC meeting and committee meetings. This meeting ran over two hours. Even as members put on their coats to leave, the conversations continued until they were outside and parted ways. The last comment heard was a promise to get information about the public library's outreach to schools.

* * * * *

These two Local School Councils offer contrasting pictures of reform. Maxwell Elementary is among the struggling councils that are unable to do much that is helpful to the school. The members who attend meetings are passive and make little attempt to ask questions or initiate discussion. The chairperson relies on the principal to lead the meeting. With the exception of taking attendance, it would be impossible to distinguish the chairperson from other members on the council. Few materials are available for members to review, and the principal appears lackluster. In contrast, the Van Buren LSC is what the proponents of Local School Councils had in mind. Members take their job seriously, voice their concerns, and are actively involved in advancing improvement initiatives.

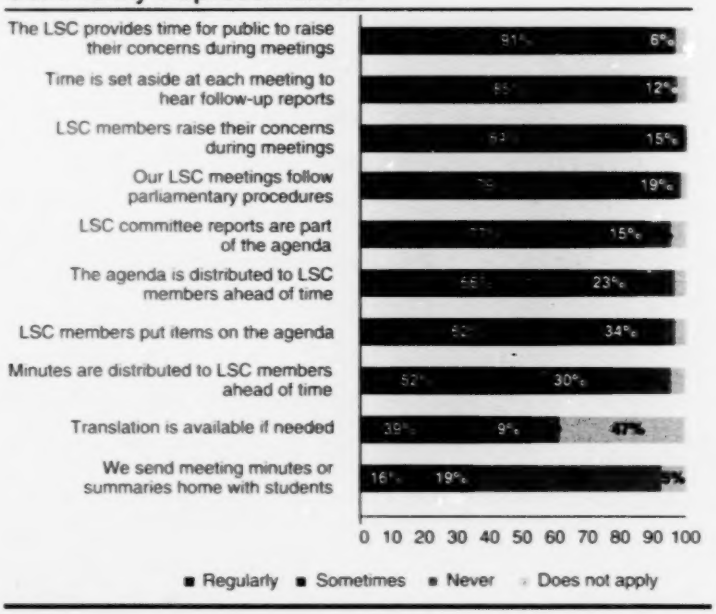
These two councils illustrate the wide range of what is actually occurring in the Chicago Public Schools. The analyses presented in this section examine how schools are distributed along this continuum.

How Are Meetings Conducted?

Our survey data indicate that most councils follow a standard public meeting protocol. More than three-quarters of the council members (principals, teachers, parents, and community representatives) say their LSC has regular committee reports, follows parliamentary procedures, and sets time aside for followup on continuing issues and for the public to raise concerns (see Table 17). Sixty-six percent report that their council distributes agendas ahead of time to members. About half of the

What LSC Meetings Are Like
Principals, Teachers, Parents, Community Representatives

Table 17


The LSC provides time for public to raise their concerns during meetings
Time is set aside at each meeting to hear follow-up reports
LSC members raise their concerns during meetings
Our LSC meetings follow parliamentary procedures
LSC committee reports are part of the agenda
The agenda is distributed to LSC members ahead of time
LSC members put items on the agenda
Minutes are distributed to LSC members ahead of time
Translation is available if needed
We send meeting minutes or summaries home with students
6%
12%
15%
19%
15%
23%
34%
30%
9%
47%
19%
0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100
Regularly
Sometimes
Never
Does not apply

Note: Due to limited space, numbers below 5 percent are not shown.

Language Barriers to Effective LSCs

About a quarter of the LSC members report that language barriers present problems. Councils with members who are not fluent in English have difficulty communicating about the content of the meeting and maintaining full participation in the discussion. Although councils attempt to offer translation to members, it is not always consistent or as thorough as it should be.

LSCs indicate that minutes from the previous meeting are distributed prior to the next meeting. LSCs are, however, unlikely to send meeting summaries home with students; only 16 percent of the members indicate that this happens regularly.

How Well Do Councils Carry Out Their Mandated Functions?

In addition to considering whether councils meet regularly and follow a reasonable meeting protocol, we asked a wide range of questions about how LSCs specifically carry out their mandated functions under the Chicago School Reform Act of 1988. These include annual evaluations of the principal and, when necessary, selecting a new one; approving the School Improvement Plan; and approving the budget. The responses here provide key evidence about the viability of LSCs.

Principal evaluation. Perhaps the single most important responsibility of the LSC is evaluating the principal and making a decision about a four-year performance contract. Past research has documented the critical role principals can play in developing and maintaining productive schools.[2] Their leadership greatly affects the school's sense of purpose, the kind of faculty it recruits, the relationship between the school and the community, and the overall school culture. Consequently, it is vital that we understand how LSCs carry out the annual evaluation of the principal and the process of selecting a new one.

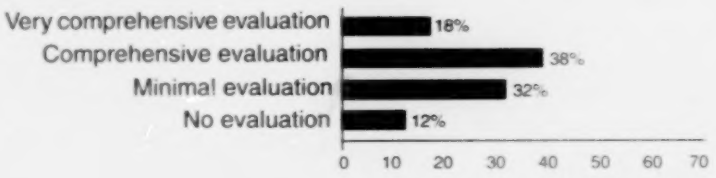
We asked LSC members ten questions about their principal evaluation process. More than half of the LSC members report that their council engages in a formal process with explicit evaluation criteria (see Table 18). These councils are likely to survey teachers and parents about the principal's performance, inform the principal at the beginning of the process about evaluation criteria, and provide helpful suggestions to principals about enhancing their leadership. We classify these responses as indicating a *comprehensive* to *very*

comprehensive evaluation.[5] Another third of the members tell us that their councils conduct a formal evaluation, but they do not necessarily engage in any of the specific procedures that we asked about. We characterize these councils as engaging in a *minimal evaluation*, since they used few if any of the procedures that commonly define a formal process. Twelve percent of the members report that the LSC did *no evaluation* of the principal. This is a troubling sign for these councils, given the centrality of the principals' work to school improvement.

Generally, principals offer more guarded views of the evaluation process than do other council members. (This is one of the few areas in the survey where principals and other council members differ in their responses.) The items with the greatest disparity were those concerning the clarity, timing, and impact of the evaluation process. Less than half of the principals say they were informed of the evaluation criteria at the beginning of the year, compared to two-thirds positive responses from other council members (see Table 19). Less than 60 percent of the principals agree or strongly agree that the evaluation helped them make changes, compared to positive responses from three quarters of the council members.

Fairly interpreting these results requires some larger perspective. Prior to the passage of the 1988 Reform Act, principals were evaluated by the district superintendent. Yet these evaluations rarely affected principals' job security. Understandably, principals were wary in 1988 when responsibility for their evaluation was shifted to Local School Councils and real consequences were now attached. Thus, it is not surprising that principals were more modest in their endorsement of the evaluation process than other LSC members. We generally expect discrepancies on reports about personnel evaluation between those doing the evaluation and those receiving it.

The Process of Evaluating the Principal Table 18
Principals, Teachers, Parents, Community Representatives



New principal selection. Although each LSC must develop its own procedures to hire a principal, most follow a set of common practices. Slightly more than 80 percent of the teacher, parent, and community members report that their council interviewed several candidates and checked references for the finalists (see Table 20). Three-quarters report that they sought input from non-LSC parents, teachers, and community residents. About 70 percent of the members say they amended the standard contract formulated by the Board of Education with additional performance criteria.

The importance of a good principal selection process was not lost on council members. Frequently, comments about this activity arose in LSC members' responses to an open-ended question: "What were your LSC's most important accomplishments this school year?" As one member noted: "We met all summer to select a new principal. It was a very long, arduous process, but the LSC worked together very well, and with good results." A focus on academic improvement was frequently cited as a key concern in this process. As one member wrote, they wanted a new principal "who is dedicated to setting this school in the right direction for student achievement."

In addition to gathering responses from teachers, parents, and community representatives, we also asked principals how they experienced the hiring process. Most principals report that the LSCs handled the process in a very professional manner. Nearly 80 percent of the newly hired principals report that the LSC conducted a formal search and that the LSC clearly stated its expectations to them (see

Selected Questions about Principal Evaluation

Table 19

Principal versus Other LSC Members

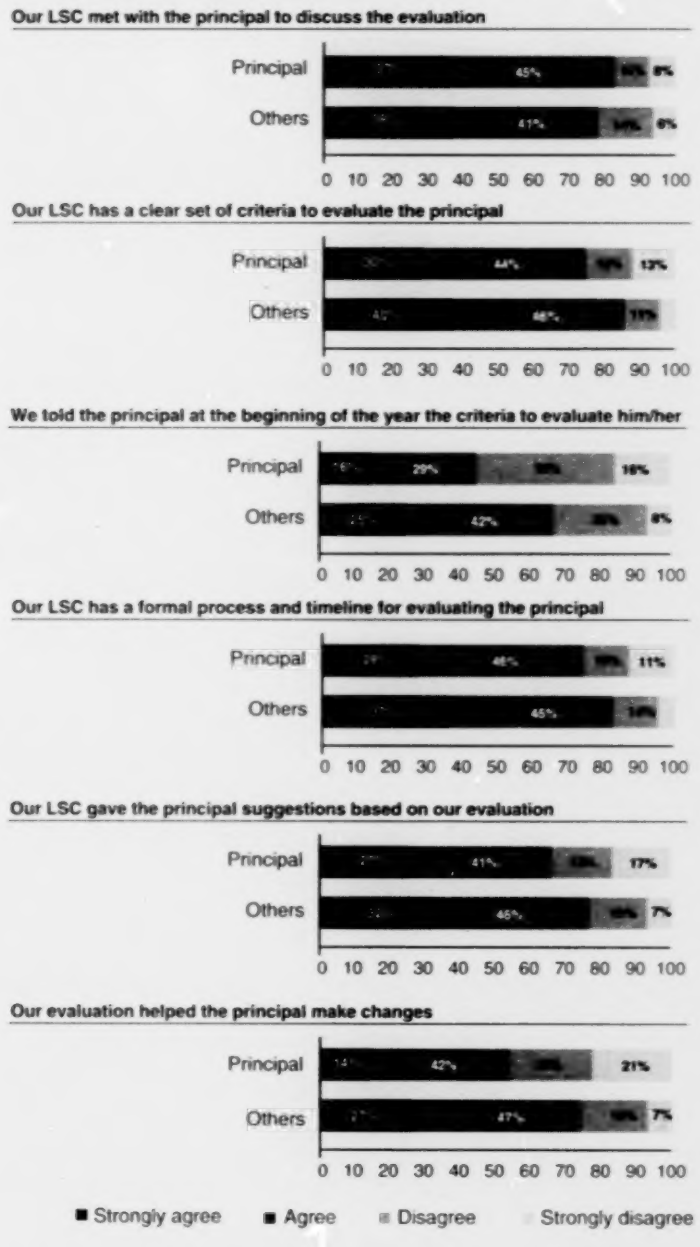


Table 21). More than 90 percent report that the LSC did a good job interviewing its candidates, and 85 percent of the principals judge the process as fair. On balance, these reports may reflect rather favorably on the LSC because the LSC selected these particular individuals. Had we been able to ask these same questions to those candidates who were not selected, the views offered may not have been so positive. Nonetheless, we had expected that principals, as compared to other council members, would offer more critical assessments of this process. Their positive responses stand as a strong endorsement of this most important work of the councils.

School Improvement Plan. Reviewing and approving the School Improvement Plan (SIP) and monitoring its implementation is another important mandated task for LSCs. The SIP is the foundation for a school's restructuring efforts. Each year, the school community outlines its goals and objectives for the upcoming school year along with the proposed initiatives to meet them.

We asked LSC members six questions about the School Improvement Plan. More than half of the LSC members report that they are *active* or *very active* in the school improvement planning process (see Table 22). They assist in developing it, hold a community forum to review it, approve the annual plan, and regularly monitor its implementation (see Table 23 for selected questions). Approximately a third of the council

members are *somewhat active*, indicating more limited activity. They understand the SIP and report that the principal asks them for their ideas, but they do not monitor the SIP regularly or ask for community input. Another 10 percent of the members indicate their LSC is *inactive* and not involved in any way in the School Improvement Plan.

School budget. The final mandated task of the LSC is approving and monitoring the school budget. Each year the principal proposes a budget, which the LSC reviews and approves. In addition, LSCs are responsible for monitoring the school's internal accounts on a monthly basis. Although much of the budget is non-negotiable (staff salaries consume approximately 80 percent of the budget), schools receive a considerable sum of discretionary monies that the LSC can decide how to spend.

When we asked members about the budget process, less than a quarter report that their council is *highly involved* (see Table 24). These council members strongly agree that the LSC is involved in all aspects of the budget, including regularly reviewing expenditure reports. Nearly 60 percent of the members report that the council is *moderately involved*. These members agree that the council considers alternative ways to spend money, has sufficient time to review and approve the budget, and regularly monitors expenditure reports. About a fifth of the members report that their councils are only *minimally involved* or *uninvolved* with the budget process. While they may discuss the alternative use of funds, they do not regularly monitor expenditures, nor do they believe they have sufficient time to review the budget. Those councils, for the most part, have deferred to the principal the responsibility for budget setting and monitoring (see Table 25 for selected questions comprising this scale).

Table 20

How LSCs Select Their Principal
Percent Reporting "Yes"
Principals, Teachers, Parents, Community Representatives

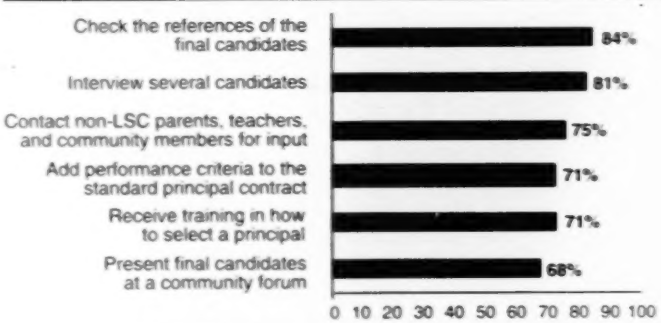
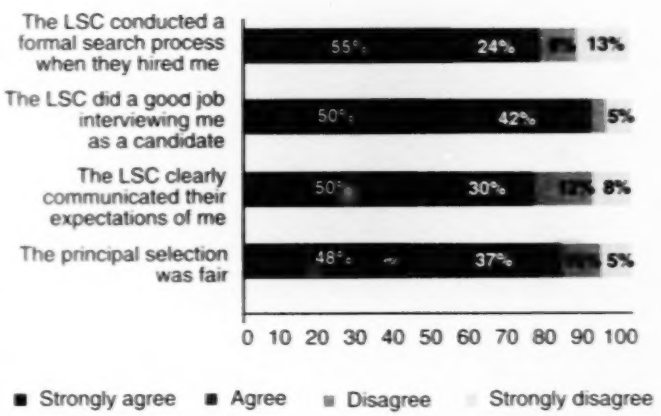

Check the references of the final candidates
84%
Interview several candidates
81%
Contact non-LSC parents, teachers, and community members for input
75%
Add performance criteria to the standard principal contract
71%
Receive training in how to select a principal
71%
Present final candidates at a community forum
68%
0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

Table 21

Principals' Views of the Selection Process

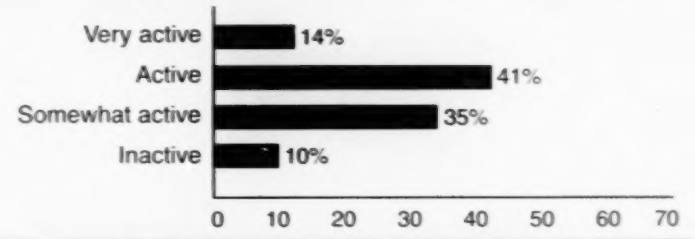


LSCs Help Develop School Partnerships

In addition to the formally mandated functions of LSCs, advocates for the 1988 Reform Act expected LSCs to help strengthen the ties between the school and local community. This is another central role for a council that intends to be very

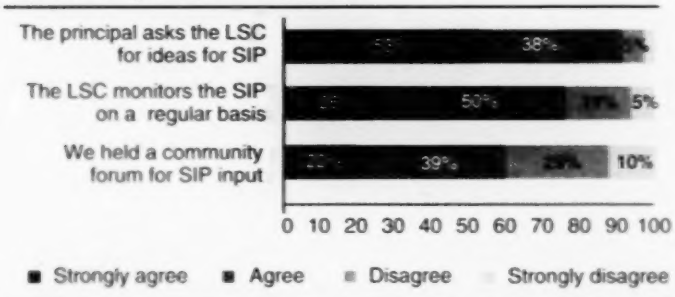
Involvement of the LSC in the School Improvement Planning Process
Principals, Teachers, Parents, Community Representatives

Table 22



Selected Questions about Involvement of the LSC in the School Improvement Planning Process
Principals, Teachers, Parents, Community Representatives

Table 23



More than three-quarters of the members say their LSC regularly monitors the School Improvement Plan and most say that the principal asks members for their ideas about the plan. Members are less likely to report that the LSC holds a public meeting to review the SIP.

active. As previously documented, many LSC members are extensively involved in their community through churches, community groups, social service organizations, and other local activities. This creates many informal occasions for better communication between the school and the surrounding neighborhood.

In addition, we asked principals to evaluate whether their LSC had assisted in developing any more formal school and community partnerships. Nearly 40 percent report that their LSC helped initiate new after-school programs and gang prevention and intervention programs. About a third state that their LSC helped to form partnerships with recreational activity centers, youth clubs, the Chicago Park District, and other schools. In general, the linkages described by principals are quite broad and diverse, ranging from vocational programs to museums and libraries. While it is difficult to determine whether these partnerships would have occurred without the help of the LSC, most principals judge their LSC to have been a significant resource in this regard. These findings support the assertion that LSCs can create "social capital" in urban neighborhoods, by providing residents serving on LSCs with skills and knowledge that can be translated to involvement in other neighborhood issues.

Summing Up LSC Viability

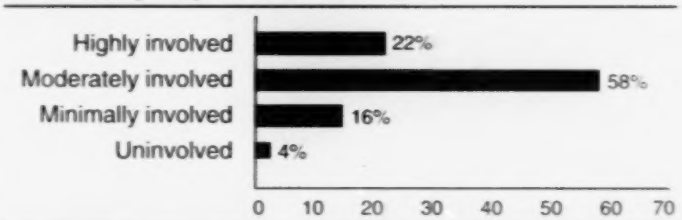
It is difficult with survey data to identify high performing LSCs like Van Buren. There is a quality to their operations that defies quick identification through simple survey questions. However, the individual LSC members' responses about how well the council executed its core functions—principal evaluations, school improvement planning, and budget—provide some insight.[4] More specifically, by averaging the responses of each council's members, we created an aggregate scale rating for each council on each of these three key tasks. Each of the three scales consists of four categories. Any council classified in the lowest two categories (category one or two) on these three measures offers some reason to worry. In contrast, schools in the highest two (categories three and four) appear to have viable LSCs.

None of the schools has an average rating that results in being classified in category one on any of the three key tasks. On the principal evaluation scale, however, 29 percent of the schools are classified in category two, meaning that they undertook only a *minimal* evaluation. The rest, 71 percent, gave a *comprehensive* evaluation (category three). Results on the School Improvement Plan scale are similar: Thirty-three percent of the schools are *somewhat active* in the SIP process (category two), while 67 percent are *active* (category three). In the budget process, 17 percent of the schools are *minimally involved* (category two), 81 percent are *involved* (category three), and 2 percent are *highly involved* (category four).

We also developed two additional "basic viability" tests for LSCs beyond the capacity to undertake the mandated tasks. First, it is hard to imagine that an LSC can be a high performing group if it does not maintain at least some minimum level of activity. This suggests that we look more closely at overall LSC activity both during council meetings and outside of them. Second, as council members engage in this activity, they must maintain a spirit of cooperation, respect, and trust and follow a code of ethics appropriate for public behavior. Clearly, advancing the collective interests of students must take precedent over personal gain. Serious questions should be raised about any council that fails this qualitative test as well.

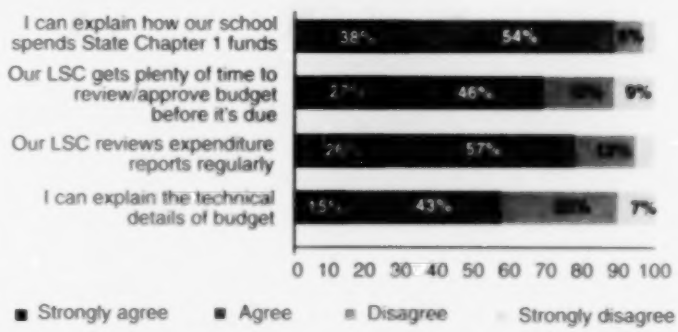
Involvement of the LSC in the Budget Process
Principals, Teachers, Parents, Community Representatives

Table 24



Selected Questions about the Involvement of the LSC in the Budget Process
Principals, Teachers, Parents, Community Representatives

Table 25



LSC members are generally positive about the budget process, with nearly 90 percent stating that they can explain how their school spends Chapter 1 funds and 83 percent saying that the LSC reviews expenditures regularly. About three-quarters of the members say they have enough time to review and approve the budget.

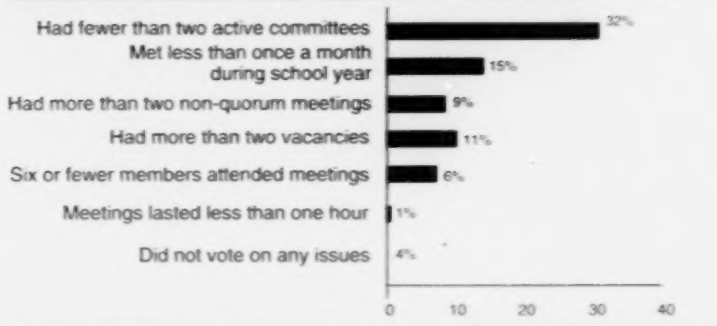
Minimum level of activity. We examined several aspects of LSC activity, including number of meetings, length of meetings, number of non-quorum meetings, vacancies, votes, and whether the LSC had viable subcommittees (see Table 26). A council with poor performance on more than two of these items suggests to us a basic inability to function.[5]

Signs of LSC trouble:

- **LSC had fewer than two active committees.** The work of the LSC must extend beyond the

Indicators of Inactive LSCs
Chairpersons and Principals

Table 26



time available during regular meetings. The majority of the LSCs have committees in key areas such as the School Improvement Plan, the budget, and principal evaluation. An active committee, by our definition, is one that has met at least three times during the school year.

- **LSC met less than once a month during the school year.** Although the legislation does not stipulate how often councils must meet, most set monthly meetings and add special meetings when necessary. Given the work load during spring when the budget and School Improvement Plan are considered, councils typically need extra meetings. Councils also hold special meetings to evaluate the principal, which they are required to do annually.

- **LSC had two or more non-quorum meetings.** By law, LSCs are required to have a quorum in order to conduct council business. In the elementary schools, six members must be present, and seven members are required for high school LSCs.[6]

- **Six or fewer members regularly attended meetings.** An LSC can reschedule an occasional non-quorum meeting. Chronic poor attendance, however, suggests a more serious problem. If an LSC regularly has half or more of its members absent, democratic practices are not feasible

- **LSC had more than two vacancies** (at the time the survey was done). One reason LSCs do not achieve a quorum is because vacancies remain unfilled. Although for most councils vacancies are not a persistent problem, those with chronic vacancies are likely to have difficulty getting work done.

- **LSC meetings lasted less than one hour.** Given the array of issues for LSCs to consider, it would be difficult for an effective LSC to deliberate issues and engage in reflective decision making in under an hour.

- **LSC did not vote on any issues.** A lack of votes may signal that an LSC is not engaged in genuine decision making.

According to chairpersons and principals, the overwhelming majority of councils report either one or no inactivity problems. Of the seven criteria considered, only one occurs in more than 20 percent of the schools—LSC has fewer than two active committees (see Table 26). Most individual problems are reported in only 10 percent or fewer of the schools.

About 13 percent of the LSCs report difficulties on two different items. While these councils conduct business, they appear to encounter some problems with member participation.

A small group, 4 percent of the councils, report three or more signs of inactivity. Although these LSCs exist on paper, they probably have no active role in governance. The comments from one LSC member on such a council succinctly tell this story: "Overall attendance was poor. Full participation was lacking. Vacancies were slow in being filled. After they were filled, some of the new members missed most of the meetings." Such reports raise questions about the viability of these particular councils and whether they are able to function effectively.

How Do High School and Elementary School LSCs Compare?

A comparison of high school and elementary school LSCs reveals some differences. High school council members report a higher level of education, on average, than elementary school LSC members. Forty percent of high school parent and community representatives have a bachelor's or more advanced degree, compared to 30 percent of their peers in elementary schools. Length of service on the LSC differs only slightly, with elementary council members serving a bit longer.

Elementary school LSC members offer slightly more positive assessments about their capacity to govern. They are 5 percent more likely to report that council members have good motives and skills and engage in actions to promote school improvement efforts. Elementary school council members also indicate that they received more training, and they provide somewhat more positive ratings (5 to 6 percent higher) of their principal and chairperson leadership.

In terms of the execution of mandated functions, here too elementary school councils offer somewhat more positive reports. For example, more elementary school LSC members believe their principal evaluation was *comprehensive* or *very comprehensive* when compared with their high school counterparts (60 percent versus 53 percent). Similarly, more LSC members in elementary schools report their council is *active* or *very active* in their School Improvement Planning process (59 percent versus 52 percent). In the same vein, significantly more elementary LSC members assert high involvement in the budget process (28 percent versus 18 percent).

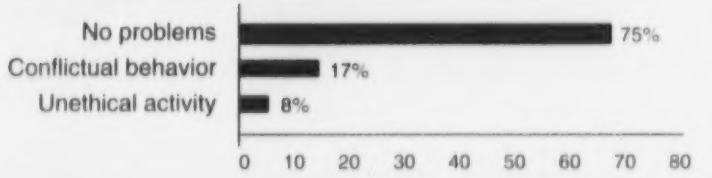
High schools by virtue of their size and complexity have more issues to handle, and this is reflected in the activity reports of council chairpersons. Almost half of the high school LSCs have five or more committees, compared to about a third of the elementary school LSCs. Although high schools and elementary schools vary little in the prevalence of committees in the mandated areas, high schools are far more likely than elementary schools to have LSC committees for security and safety, discipline, and community relations. Similarly, high school LSCs generally have more meetings than elementary school LSCs. Chairpersons report that 71 percent of the high school LSCs meet more than once a month during the school year, as compared to 42 percent of the elementary school LSCs. However, high schools have more meetings without a quorum.

High school councils also experience more problems retaining parent members, while elementary schools have more problems retaining community representatives. Yet looking at the total number of vacancies, high school councils fare worse than elementary school councils. Reports about problem behavior are about the same for elementary and high school LSCs.

In general, many of the differences between the accounts of elementary and high school council members are not large, but the results are reasonably consistent. Elementary school council members offer somewhat more positive reports about their operations and contributions to the school. This occurs despite the fact that high school councils have higher education levels of their members, have a more extensive subcommittee structure, and meet more often. These findings echo those of earlier Consortium reports, *Charting Reform: Chicago Teachers Take Stock* (1995) and *Charting Reform in Chicago: The Students Speak* (1996). In both cases, teachers' and students' responses indicated less satisfaction with Chicago's public high schools. It is significant that, regardless of who is surveyed, the high schools do not fare as well as the elementary schools.

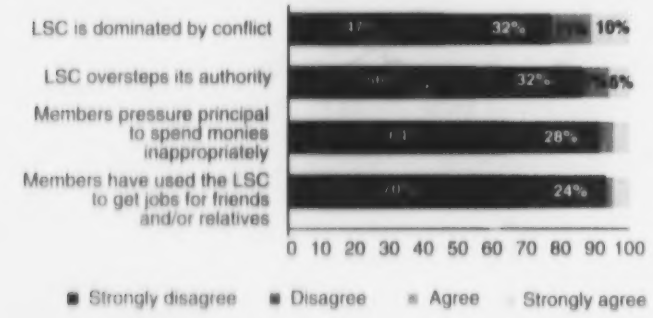
Troublesome LSC Activity
Principals, Teachers, Parents, Community Representatives

Table 27



Questions about Troublesome LSC Activity
Principals, Teachers, Parents, Community Representatives

Table 28



To check the validity of the overall activity indicator, we compared how the thirty most active councils rate themselves on the four mandated LSC functions (budget, School Improvement Plan, principal selection, and principal evaluation) to how the thirty least active councils rate themselves on these same mandated functions. As expected, members of the least active councils offer significantly lower ratings on the execution of these functions. Members of inactive LSCs also rate themselves significantly lower on the two self-assessment indicators of capacity to govern introduced in Section II. These results both validate our indicators of inactivity and confirm our conclusion that a small number of inactive councils are not viable operating bodies by their own estimation.

Unethical or conflictual council behavior. A common fear is that corruption will seep into the decision-making process of Local School Councils. In the context of long-standing practices of political patronage in Chicago, such worries appear well-founded. Thus, we asked members whether some of their council colleagues pressured the principal to spend money inappropriately or used their position on the LSC to get jobs for friends or family. Both of these are *prima facie* indicators of unethical behavior. Concerns were also raised early in reform about conflicts occurring at LSC meetings if members joust for authority. In the Chicago context, where city council meetings have been marked by fisticuffs on occasion, these concerns too are not surprising. Thus, we asked two direct questions about such conflictual behavior as well.

The overwhelming majority of council members report that their LSC has not engaged in any such problematic behavior. Three-quarters of LSC members report having *no problems* like these (see Table 27). These members see no evidence of pressure to spend money inappropriately or to use the LSC to get jobs for friends. They also do not believe that the LSC has overstepped its authority or is dominated by conflict. Seventeen percent of the members report that their LSC has some problems around *conflictual behavior* but report no unethical behavior regarding money and jobs. About 8 percent of the respondents indicate that some *unethical activity* is occurring at their schools. Here, too, we found no significant differences among the reports of principals, teachers, parents, and community representatives on this set of items (see Table 28 for selected

questions that comprise this scale). It is important to note that these data about unethical behavior were collected before the Board of Trustees passed the stringent ethics code for LSC members. Current LSC members were elected after this ethics code was adopted.

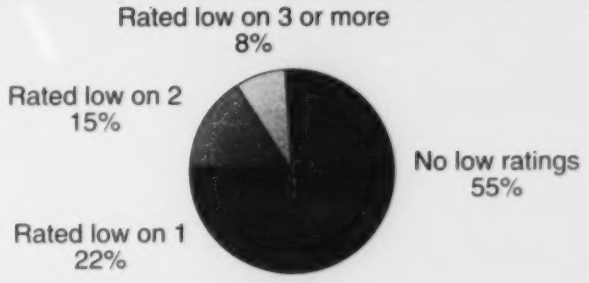
Obviously, these topics are sensitive issues for council members to divulge, as any member engaged in such activity is unlikely to admit it. Reports are more likely to come from other council members who have witnessed these problems.

In order to try to estimate the percentage of councils that are plagued with either conflictual or unethical activity, we looked for confirming evidence school by school. If two or more members within a council reported that their LSC was engaged in such behavior, there was reason to suspect impropriety even if it was not the prevailing view of the entire council. When we examined LSCs using this criterion, we found that 12 percent exhibited excessive conflict and overstepped their authority. Unethical behavior appears to occur in 5 percent of the councils.

Because we are analyzing self reports, our prevalence estimate of problematic behavior may still be too low. Even if we are off, however, by 100 percent, the true incidence of misuse of funds and patronage would still be only 10 percent of the councils. This means that the overwhelming majority of councils refrain from such activity. To be sure, even a single incident of unethical activity should be abhorred. However, despite the media attention that a few troubled councils have received, the actual problems appear to be very infrequent.

Table 29

LSCs' Ratings on Performance Indicators



Tallying the results. We have created a set of indicators for each council that summarizes members' reports about executing their annual mandated tasks—evaluating the principal, reviewing and approving the School Improvement Plan, and approving and monitoring the budget—plus the two summary indicators that gauge LSC inactivity and unethical behavior.[7] Each indicator alone is a partial assessment; taken as a set, these five measures offer a more complete view of each LSC's viability. We now "tally" the results.

Over half of the LSCs (55 percent) did not score low on any of the five indicators (see Table 29). Thus, the majority of councils appear to operate well. Twenty-two percent of the councils scored low on one of the five indicators. While schools in this group may benefit from increased training and support and more external assistance, there is no sign that these councils lack viability. They operate, but perhaps they could do better.

In contrast, councils reporting problems on three or more indicators raise serious concern. These councils are almost certainly experiencing major operational problems. About 8 percent of the system fall in this group. Another 15 percent report problems on two of the measures. Some portion of these councils probably are not functioning as the reform intended. Based on the assumption that only some of the LSCs in the latter group are experiencing serious problems, we estimate that approximately 10 to 15 percent of the LSCs

are not viable operating entities. The rest of the councils, which is the overwhelming majority, function well.

On balance, while 10 to 15 percent of the councils represents a small fraction of the system, we should not lose sight of the fact that these schools educate 50,000 or more students. To the extent that problems in these councils impede progress in their schools, these LSCs merit attention. Fortunately, the data presented in this report also suggest some avenues for improvement. Councils that are not carrying out their responsibilities need more training and external assistance. If this help fails, the law provides for central office intervention. Since the data for this study were collected, all LSC members have been required to complete 18 hours of training that was not previously mandated. For LSCs experiencing serious problems, however, there appears to be a need for more targeted assistance. On-site studies should be carried out to determine why these councils are ineffective and what steps might be taken to remedy this situation. These issues should be followed up so that more effective forms of assistance and intervention can be tailored to specific problems.

Testing Our Evidence

Given that the results presented in this report are based on self reports from council members, we worried that members might paint a brighter picture of their LSC than is the case. For this reason, we looked carefully for response discrepancies among the various roles represented on the council. As noted earlier, because LSCs were initially viewed as mechanisms to empower parent and community members, we might expect to find sharp differences between how the school professionals (teachers and principals) and other LSC members (parents and community representatives) judged performance. While we detected some differences, for the most part they were neither large nor significant. Principals, for example, are not as positive about their own evaluation process as others on the council are. School professionals are also not quite as positive about their LSCs' capacity to govern as the parents and community representatives are. In contrast, principals tend to rate their leadership ability more highly than other members on the council rate them. Likewise, chairpersons rate themselves more highly than others do. None of this is terribly surprising nor does it detract from the general pattern that principals, teachers, parents, and community representatives on the LSC offer very similar and mostly positive reports. Given that school professionals were quite wary of LSCs at the onset of reform and were vulnerable to increased local accountability, the similarity in their reports strengthens the credibility of the overall findings.

In addition, we also compared LSC member responses to results from the Consortium's 1994 teachers survey. Specifically, we looked at teachers' views of their LSC and compared them to what LSC members said about themselves. We found a correlation of 0.74 at the school level between LSC member reports about their productivity and teachers' collective ratings of the LSC. Considering that these two surveys are separated by a year and are virtually independent, the teachers survey adds further credibility to the results presented here.

Finally, we also looked at the 1994 teacher reports about the LSCs' role on several specific school improvement initiatives (e.g., parental involvement, community relations, safety initiatives, and student behavior). Here, too, we found that teachers were more likely to offer positive assessments in schools where their councils, one year later, also offered positive self reports.

Each of these validity tests points in the same direction—LSC members appear to be giving reasonably valid reports about their work and their schools.

IV.

A Closer Look at Schools with Problem Councils

We have found so far that the vast majority of councils are viable operating bodies and that most contribute in positive ways to their school communities. A small portion, however, are experiencing serious problems. This section takes a closer look at these councils. If the aspirations of the 1988 Chicago School Reform Act—to advance educational opportunities for all children—are to be realized, it is important to have a better understanding of the situations in which the reform is not working very well.

For the purpose of this analysis, we identified "problem councils" in three different ways:[1]

- Those experiencing "productivity problems" with the execution of their mandated functions;
- Those with low levels of formal activity or "activity problems"; and
- Those with corroborated reports of "sustained conflict and unethical behavior problems."

We then pulled out the highest rated and lowest rated schools[2] in the study on each of these three council indicators and compared them in terms of their human and social resources, school leadership, and the nature of the communities in which they are located. In general, the results were quite similar across the three analyses. We detail below the findings of the productivity analysis and then highlight some distinctive factors related to council inactivity, and conflict and unethical behavior problems.

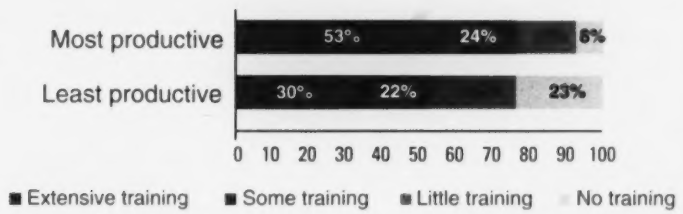
Factors Related to Councils' Lack of Productivity

Human and social resources. We found no major differences between the 30 most productive and 30 least productive councils in terms of the basic backgrounds of council members. The average educational levels and occupational statuses are quite similar. In fact, the parents and community representatives on the most productive councils have a slightly lower educational level than members on the least productive councils. About 60 percent of the members on the most productive LSCs are likely to have at least some college as compared to nearly 70 percent of the members of the least productive LSCs.

The least productive councils, however, received less training. While more than half of the members on the most productive councils report extensive training, this is true for less than a third of members on the least productive councils (see Table 30). In fact, about a quarter of the members on least productive councils report receiving no training at all. In

Least Productive Councils Have Less Training
Principals, Teachers, Parents, Community Representatives

Table 30



addition, nearly two-thirds of the members on the least productive councils indicate that a lack of training kept them from doing their job well. These results suggest that the initiative in the 1995 Reform Act to mandate 18 hours of supplemental training was much needed.[3]

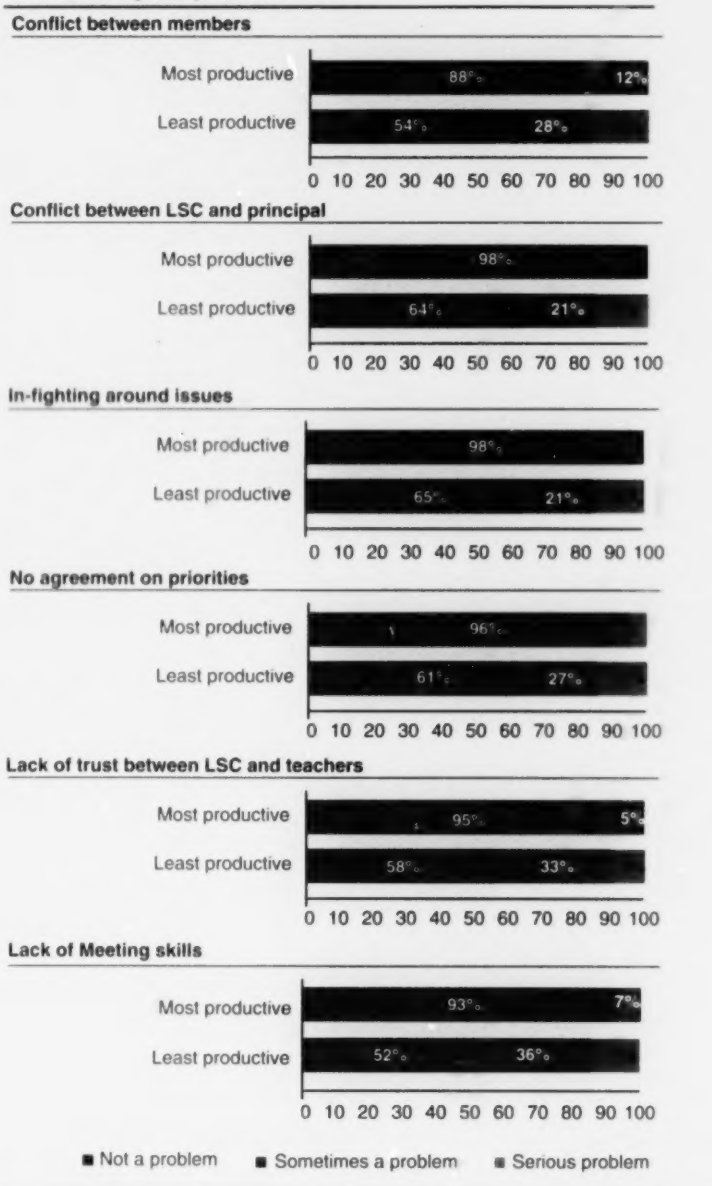
Members of the least productive councils also report a lower level of LSC related knowledge and skills among council colleagues. Approximately 50 percent say that members have effective meeting skills, compared to about 90 percent of the members on the most productive councils (see Table 31). We also considered how well council members work together. Not surprisingly, members on the least productive councils are more likely to report infighting, lack of trust, lack of agreement on priorities, and the existence of sustained conflict. A much greater percentage of members on the least productive councils cite these as serious problems in their schools.

Members of the least productive councils are also considerably less likely to report that they have knowledge of new educational practices (Table 32), know what goes on in the school (Table 33), and understand their roles and responsibilities (Table 34). Member commitment is also a problem for the least productive councils (see Table 35).

In sum, while members on the most and the least productive councils look very similar in terms of formal education and work experience, we found marked differences in the specific knowledge and skills they possess about council and school operations. The least productive coun-

Least Productive Councils Experience More Conflict and Lack Meeting Skills Table 31

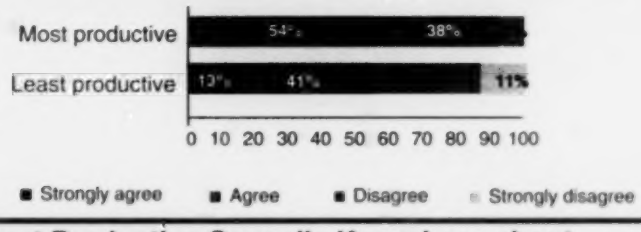
Principals, Teachers, Parents, Community Representatives



Note: Due to limited space, numbers below 5 percent are not shown.

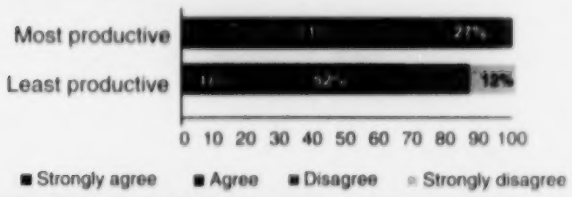
Least Productive Councils Know Less about New Educational Practices Table 32
Principals, Teachers, Parents, Community Representatives

Our LSC is knowledgeable about new educational practices.



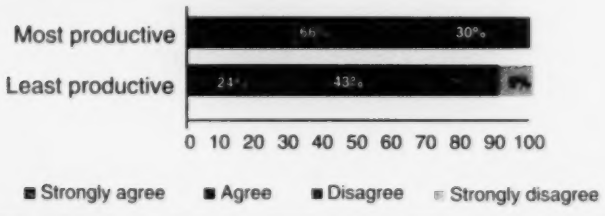
Least Productive Councils Know Less about What Goes On in School Table 33
Principals, Teachers, Parents, Community Representatives

Members of this LSC are well informed about what is going on in school.



Least Productive Councils Have a Poorer Understanding of Roles/Responsibilities Table 34
Principals, Teachers, Parents, Community Representatives

Our LSC has a clear understanding of its roles and responsibilities.



cils are also more likely to experience difficulty in working together as a group. Both of these concerns signal prime candidates for enhanced council training and ongoing support.

School leadership. Principal and chairperson leadership skills are another key to council effectiveness. We asked council members a range of questions about their chairpersons, including whether the chair communicates with members between meetings, keeps the LSC focused on issues, gets information for the LSCs, and consults with the principal. The items for rating principal leadership focus on the principals' orientation toward shared decision making and expanded participation, and the extent to which the principal helps the council understand school improvement planning and the budget.

The most and the least productive councils rate their leaders quite differently. Members of the most productive councils almost unanimously (96 percent) view their principals in a *positive* or *very positive* light (see Table 36). They either agree or strongly agree that the principal helps members understand the budget, is strongly committed to shared decision making, and asks LSC members for ideas concerning the School Improvement Plan (see Table 37). In contrast, only 57 percent of the members in the least productive councils offer the same opinions.

Members on the most and the least productive councils also view their chairpersons differently. Ninety percent of members on productive councils hold either *positive* or *very positive* views about their chairpersons (see Table 38). They either agree or

strongly agree that this person communicates with members between meetings, obtains information for the LSC, and keeps the LSC focused on issues (see Table 39). In contrast, only 66 percent of the members on the least productive councils view their chairperson in a similar fashion.

These results indicate that the least productive councils suffer from weaker leadership from both the principal and council chair. For councils with a weak chairperson, the principal can pick up the slack and still guide the council in fulfilling its duties. Similarly, a strong chairperson may be able to compensate to some extent for poor principal leadership. A void in leadership in both positions, however, makes it much less likely that the council as a whole can be productive.

School and community characteristics. LSCs are embedded in larger school communities, which may affect their work. For this reason, we also examined the possible effects of a wide range of neighborhood characteristics and types of student body compositions. Most of these factors bore no relationship to LSC productivity. Two factors, however, did stand out.

First, when we focus on the most productive councils, they are located all across the city in virtually every neighborhood. This finding on LSCs extends results from our earlier reports that the opportunities created by the 1988 Reform Act have been broadly seized across the various neighborhoods of the city. However, also similar to results from our prior reports, the "schools left behind by reform" appear concentrated in certain kinds of contexts. In terms of the 30 least productive councils, these are more likely to be located in neighborhoods with high concentrations of poverty.

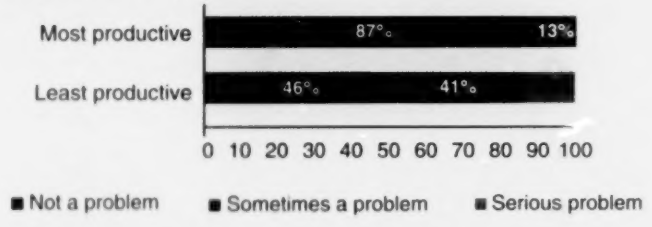
Second, the most productive councils are three times more likely to be located in small schools. This further extends a long stream of prior Consortium findings that reform is working better in small schools.[4]

Least Productive Councils Lack Commitment among Members

Table 35

Principals, Teachers, Parents, Community Representatives

How much of a problem is lack of commitment among LSC members?



Distinctive Factors Related to Council Inactivity

We also looked at how an LSC's human and social resources, school leadership, and school community characteristics affect council activity. In general, the results were quite similar to those above. Active councils exist all across the city. In contrast, inactive councils are more likely to:

- **Be located in the poorest neighborhoods.** The least active councils are three times more likely than the most active councils (17 percent versus 5 percent) to be located in neighborhoods where more than two-thirds of the residents are below the poverty line.

- **Report lower levels of meeting skills and commitment among council members.** Two-thirds of the members of the most active LSCs have a *positive* or *very positive* view of their council's capacity to govern, compared with 51 percent of the least active LSCs.

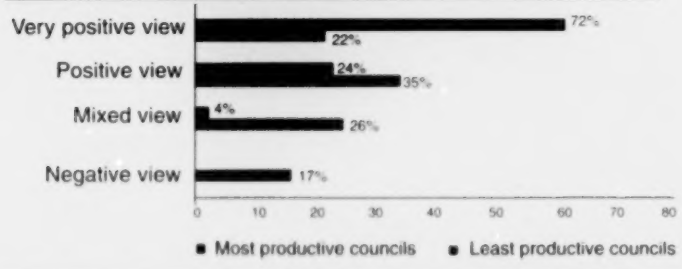
- **Have weaker principal and chairperson leadership.** Only one-third of members of the least active councils have a *very positive* view of their principals, compared with almost half of the members of the most active councils. For chairpersons, one-third of the active council members hold a *very positive* view, versus 18 percent for inactive council members.

- **Be in predominately African-American schools.** Of the least active councils, nearly 80 percent

Principal Leadership: A Key Difference

Table 36

Principals, Teachers, Parents, Community Representatives



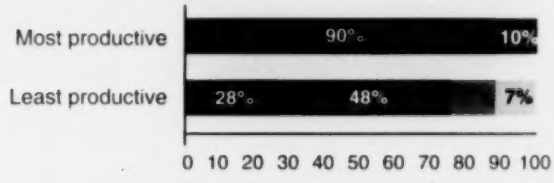
Selected Questions on Principal Leadership

Table 37

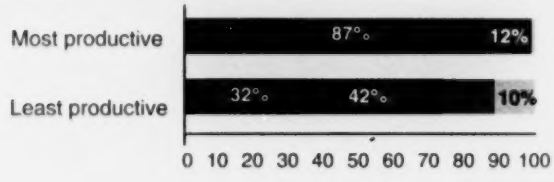
Principals, Teachers, Parents, Community Representatives

The principal in this school . . .

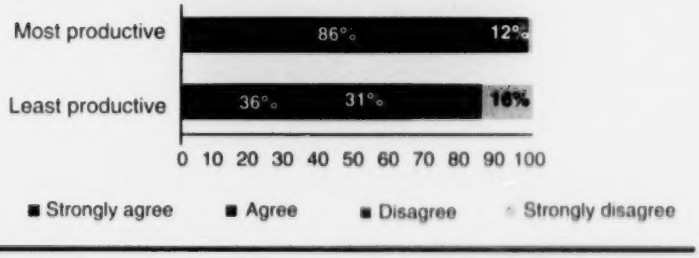
Asks for our ideas for the School Improvement Plan



Helps us understand the budget



Is strongly committed to shared decision making



are in predominately African-American schools, and the remainder are in mixed minority schools. None are in predominantly Hispanic or integrated schools. By way of comparison, 47 percent of CPS schools are predominantly African-American and 29 percent are mixed minority.

We found no differences between active and inactive councils in terms of members' education and occupation levels, amount of LSC training, length of service, and council turnover. Interestingly, inactive councils are somewhat more likely in small schools. Since small schools have fewer discretionary resources to allocate, these councils may simply need to meet less.

Distinctive Factors Related to Conflict or Unethical Behavior on Councils

Similar to inactivity, councils experiencing conflict or unethical behavior are likely to cluster in distinctive contexts:

- **In areas with high concentrations of poverty.** Fifteen percent of the 30 councils experiencing the most ethical problems are in neighborhoods where more than two-thirds of the residents are below the poverty line, compared with less than 4 percent of the 30 councils with the fewest ethical problems.

- **Where parents and community members have significantly less formal education.** Eighteen percent of LSC members of councils experiencing the most ethical

problems have college degrees, compared with almost half of the members of councils with no ethical problems. Also, one-quarter of the members of the least ethical councils have less than a high school education, compared with only 4 percent of the members of the most ethical councils.

- **Where principal and chairperson leadership is weak.** On unethical councils, 40 percent of the members have a *very positive* view of the principal and 30 percent have a *very positive* view of the chair. In comparison, 55 percent of members on ethical councils have a *very positive* view of the principal, and 38 percent of the chair.

- **Where social relations across the school community are weak or negative.** On unethical councils, 20 percent have a *very positive* view of school and community relations, compared with one third for ethical councils. Unethical councils are also three times more likely to have a *negative* view (13 percent versus less than 5 percent).

- **Where community crime rates are high.** According to crime statistics from the City of Chicago, the incidence of crimes such as assault and drug use is 40 percent higher in neighborhoods with schools whose LSCs are experiencing conflict or ethical problems. This finding suggests that when social discord is pervasive

Table 38

Chairperson Leadership Is Weaker on Least Productive Councils

Principals, Teachers, Parents, Community Representatives

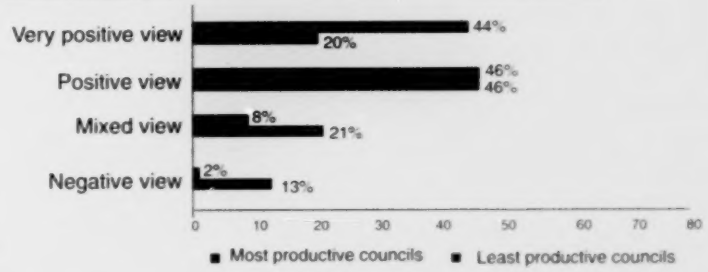
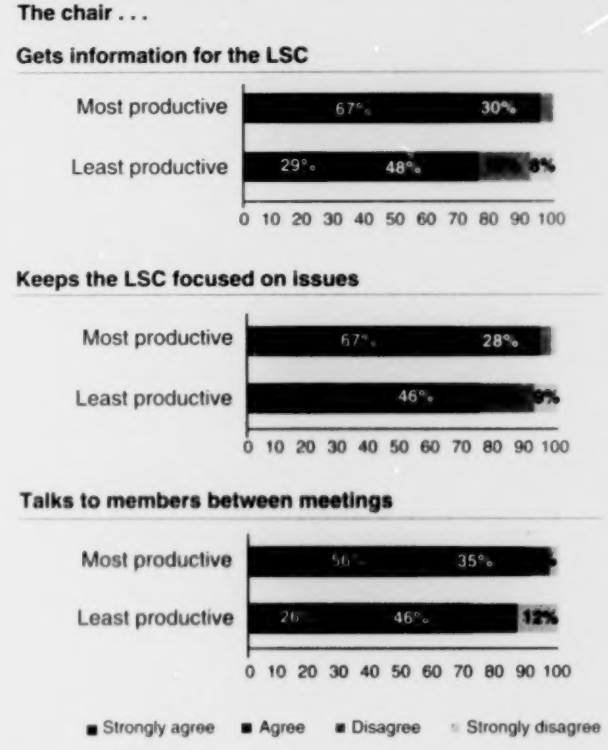


Table 39

Selected Questions on Chairperson Leadership

Principals, Teachers, Parents, Community Representatives



in the community, it may also be more likely in the school council.

Summing Up

Looking across our three parallel analyses of troubled councils, some general patterns emerge. While the formal background of council members plays little role, the absence of specific knowledge, skills, and training is a major contributing factor to problem councils. Even more important is an absence of leadership in the chair and principal. The differences between most and least effective councils are quite large on these indicators. More generally, problem councils exist in settings where there are weak adult relations among teachers, parents, and the local community. Moreover, these problems of inadequate training and leadership and weak social relations are more likely to occur in very poor neighborhoods, in African-American communities, and in context with high crime rates.

Having documented the concentration of weak LSCs in distinctive contexts, it is also important to keep in mind that high performing LSCs also exist in very similar contexts—sometimes literally just down the street, serving a virtually identical student population. Decentralization has produced highly varied outcomes across Chicago's school communities. The causes of this variability, however, are more complex than just factors of race/ethnicity, income level, and poverty. Key aspects in the school community—leadership, training, and cooperative adult relations—also play a major role in sorting out who has moved forward and who is left behind.

V.

Listening to LSC Members

Local School Council members believe they have made great strides and significant accomplishments in their schools. They also have been frustrated by a number of roadblocks. We take a closer look at both of these below.

Roadblocks That Prevent LSCs from Improving Their Schools

We asked members to tell us about problems external to the council that prevent their LSCs from improving the school. The two most frequently cited concerns are social problems outside the school and lack of funds. Almost half of the LSC members identify these issues as a serious problem, while more than a third say they are sometimes a problem (see Table 40). Given the many needs of disadvantaged students and families and the physical deterioration of many schools, this is not surprising. Concern about low parent involvement is also quite prevalent. Thirty percent of the members say this is a serious problem. These are followed by an interrelated set of concerns about teachers and teaching conditions, including the difficulty of removing poor teachers, lack of time for professional development, other union contracts, and staff resistance to change. In contrast, principal leadership is a serious concern for only 10 percent of the respondents, and racial/ethnic tensions for only 5 percent.

Interestingly, a few of these problems, such as parental involvement and poor teaching materials, can be directly influenced by LSCs. Most, however, require policy action on the part of the school system as a whole, including a need for more streamlined procedures for removal of poor teachers, more opportunities for professional development, and relaxation of restrictive union agreements. One can read the roadblocks identified by LSC members as a wish list for policy action by the Chicago School Reform Board of Trustees.

"Roadblocks" That Prevent LSCs from Improving Schools Table 40

LSC Accomplishments

In addition to responding to multiple choice survey items, council members were also asked to describe in their own words their most significant accomplishments in the past year. What individuals chose to mention provides considerable insight into local priorities. We read through all of these

individual reports, classified them by general themes, and highlight below the most prevalent responses. For this purpose, we often will rely on LSC members' own words, which can offer a distinctive "local voice" about a council's work.

The most frequently cited accomplishments by LSC members, including principals, were in the area of core academic programs. Their responses indicate a strong focus on academic improvement. Council members frequently comment about a vast array of new initiatives to advance achievement and spur student engagement in learning. They wrote, for example, about starting a science or computer lab, reducing class size in grades 1 and 2, and initiating after-school tutoring programs, new curricula, and new programs to promote student attendance.

Second, many council members also described improvements in the physical environment of their schools. They report successful renovation and expansion projects, such as building additions, new windows, and repairs to lunchrooms. In addition, they point to such accomplishments as the purchase of new desks, chairs, and other classroom equipment, and the purchase of new playground equipment. The consequences of such initiatives can be far reaching for both adults and students. As one council member comments:

Having a new lunchroom added to the school. Achieving a sense of pride in the school. Having new windows placed in all over. Seeing the glow of each child's face when they walk in the school looking as if they are ready and eager to learn, with the feeling of being safe.

Third, council members also wrote about efforts to improve the learning climate through the creation of clear attendance and disciplinary rules. They mention efforts to create a sense of clear expectations and pride in the school. Many LSCs, for example, have pushed their schools to adopt a dress code. This is the kind of issue that can be divisive to resolve by a broad school system. A local consensus in individual school communities, however, may be much easier to achieve.

Fourth, despite the fact that 30 percent of the LSC members continue to cite "low parent involvement" as a major concern, many LSC members also note significant progress in this area. In their own words, [We accomplished]:

Increased parent involvement, a parent training center, after-school programs for tutors and student interest areas, and continued parental focus on the illegal, immoral, and unconscionable overcrowding.

Creating an atmosphere where parents, students and teachers worked together for the betterment of academic achievement of students.

And finally, LSC members cite as significant accomplishments an impressive array of partnerships—local, citywide, and national—with such diverse groups as the PTA, businesses, and the Coalition of Essential Schools. In reporting on these efforts, LSC members speak to part of the original vision of the 1988 Reform Act—LSC members as agents linking local school professionals with the parents and communities these schools serve.

Personal Impact of Serving on a Local School Council

One aim of the Chicago School Reform Act of 1988 is to enable previously disenfranchised groups of parents and community leaders to take a greater role in shaping the education of their children, and through this also to become involved in other neighborhood issues, such as neighborhood safety and economic development. This is very much a two-way street. While council members have opportunities to influence the school, they also have a chance to learn a great deal through this experience. To probe these consequences of reform, we asked council members to comment on the personal impact that serving on an LSC has had on them. Their responses indicate that the vast majority feel deeply affected by this work. They believe that they have developed as more competent citizens and that they are more knowledgeable about schools. This learning, however, has not always been easy.

Personal enablement. Council members' responses suggest that serving on the LSC has increased their sense of self worth and that they have

acquired valuable civic skills, including organization, budgeting, listening to others, and the ability to work in groups. Many view serving on the LSC as having had a very positive effect on their lives.

It got me to mature a little bit and to understand more things and to have more responsibility.

It has made me more aware of the importance of education. And it has built up my self esteem because I feel now that I can get along with parents, staff, and administrators in a positive and enjoyable manner.

I now have experience as a member on an effective, very active committee. I have been an effective, contributing member. My ability to function in committee has improved. An awareness of a school's operation has been gained.

Yes, it has seriously taught me to deal with adversity. I have learned some things about budgets. I have learned how to deal with different values and attitudes.

A deeper knowledge about schools. Many of the council members' responses indicate that serving on the LSC has increased their knowledge about the school system, their local school, and what constitutes a good school. LSC members report that as a result of serving on the council, they understand more about how schools function and the obstacles to improvement that exist in the school system. Typical comments in this regard are:

It's made me realize just how complex an organism a school is.

[It] keeps me aware of how many entities have an effect on education.

* * * * *

The experience and exposure has clearly opened my eyes to the very real changes needed if our children are to receive a quality education.

* * * * *

Many LSC members indicate that they gained an appreciation for the roles that principals, teachers, and parents can play and how important it is for all stakeholders to work cooperatively in order to bring about real change at the local school level.

The experience and exposure has clearly opened my eyes to the very real changes needed if our children are to receive a quality education. I know now that it is up to the parents, teachers, community, and school. Administrators need to be committed to our children's education. We need to become the gatekeepers and [be] more relentless in our efforts in order for our children to have a bright future.

I have become more aware of the responsibilities of the entire community in educating our children. I have become even more involved in my children's education. I have learned a great deal about what it takes to run a school and many other things that are helpful in helping my children and our school as a whole.

The price sometimes paid. While LSC members were effusive in their comments about their work, they also note that this work exacts a price. Serving on the council requires a large amount of time that reduces availability for family life and other activities. In addition, council members frequently cite the pressure of serving on an LSC and being responsible for making decisions that affect the lives of children, administration, staff, and teachers. Two parents comment:

There is far more pressure and responsibility than I had anticipated.

It has taken an enormous amount of time away from my job and family. I have found it emotionally upsetting and very stressful.

And a chairperson notes:

A greater "spotlight" has been put upon me and my family than I ever would have sought. . . . Everyone expects me, as chair, to "solve" all their problems. It's stressful.

Summing Up

The responses of the council members suggest that as a result of serving on the LSC, they have developed a variety of skills and increased their sense of self worth. They have developed decision making skills, public speaking skills, knowledge of planning, and knowledge of budgets that can be used in their subsequent civic participation around education and other community issues. They have enlarged their knowledge about the structure and function of the larger school system as well as the local school community. Council members also have acquired a much greater appreciation for the contribution of a variety of individuals—faculty and staff, administration, parents, and community members—to the progress of the school. They emphasized the need for communication and collaboration among council members and between council members and the larger school community.

For most council members, participating on the LSC has had a profound impact. It has been a life-altering experience, changing them not only as individuals, but also as citizens in their local communities. Such personal growth, however, does not necessarily come easily.

VI.

Interpretive Summary

This is a story of thousands of Chicago residents who volunteer untold hours to help their local public schools. It is not a story that gets headlines or even an honorable mention in a local awards ceremony. The vast majority of Local School Council members quietly oversee school policy and carry out their official duties of evaluating the principal, approving the budget, and approving and monitoring the School Improvement Plan. Their most frequently cited contributions to the school are in improving core academic programs, followed by improvements in the school's physical environment, improving attendance and discipline, and increasing parent involvement. They also help the school with a myriad of other small and large tasks. Beyond their monthly meetings, LSC members make phone calls, assist teachers, visit other schools, contact their aldermen, raise money, and establish partnerships with community organizations. Even though their work may be invisible to the broader public, LSC members live with the usual stresses of leadership, including the strong sense of responsibility for children's lives and the struggle to find consensus and work cooperatively with their colleagues and their community.

The evidence assembled here suggests that most councils carry out their duties in a responsible fashion. For example, they are systematic in selecting a principal and have substantial involvement in school improvement planning. According to principals and teachers as well as parent and community members, LSCs—in the majority of schools—are a significant resource supporting the work of school staff and expanding the capacity for improvement.

Although the primary function of the LSCs is local accountability over key matters such as school leadership and allocation of improvement resources, effective LSCs also act as a liaison among the school, the community, and an array of outside organizations. Several LSCs, for example, noted that their greatest accomplishment was resolving overcrowding in their school. This required meetings with members from several departments at the Board of Education, the aldermen, and members in the community who were divided on how best to resolve this issue. Some LSCs have been active in bringing the school closer to the community by establishing links with neighborhood libraries, the park district, local businesses, and various community groups.

This study has also identified serious problems among 10 to 15 percent of the LSCs. Some of these councils cannot muster enough members to convene their meetings regularly; others are plagued by conflict; and a few have members who abuse their authority. Such councils fail to serve their schools and hinder improvement efforts. Although the proportion of schools where such activity is occurring is quite small, the lives of many children are still affected. Moreover, even in very limited numbers, the behavior of these councils undermines the laudable efforts of so many others to bring genuine change to their school communities. External accountability and some form of external intervention are both appropriate and necessary. The key is to pursue such policies in a way that preserves the autonomy of the vast majority of schools that are operating responsibly and that assures the continued integrity of local governance.

We should not lose sight of our central findings. The vast majority of LSCs are viable governance organizations that responsibly carry out their mandated duties and are active in building school and community partnerships. The initial worries that

councils would infringe on professional autonomy have proved unfounded. Principals and teachers strongly support the work of their LSCs. Schools need human resources to combat the array of problems that confront them. Local School Council members have infused the schools not only with their time and skills, but also with community resources resulting from members joining in partnerships with the schools.

We have estimated that between 50 and 60 percent of the LSCs are proactive agents for improvement in their school communities. Another quarter to third of the councils share some of these characteristics of the high performing group, but they also struggle. These councils could work better, and their responses suggest that they would benefit from more training and ongoing support. On the positive side, the 1995 Reform Act expanded the school system's requirements and capacity. Whether the current resources are now sufficient, however, remains unclear. A quick, targeted follow-up study with LSCs, regarding current training and support opportunities, would provide helpful guidance to those who are working to strengthen the LSCs. Several actors, including foundations, school reform groups, legislators, and the Board of Trustees, would benefit from this information.

One key question not directly addressed in this report remains: Do effective LSCs increase achievement? This topic is part of continuing research about which we will report in the future. It is already clear, however, that links between LSC activity and academic improvement depend on prudent local initiative. Specifically, for sustained academic improvement to occur, several essential supports must be in place: school leadership, parent and community partnerships, professional development and collaboration, a quality instructional program, and a student-centered learning climate. An effective LSC can promote such developments by hiring a good principal and engaging in strategic programming, planning, evaluation, and budgeting toward these ends. In short, how well an LSC executes these functions is the most direct evaluation of the effectiveness of that LSC. In contrast, improving academic achievement depends heavily on the interactions of teachers with students around subject matter, primarily in classrooms. To be sure, the work of an LSC can enhance the probability that these interactions will be productive, but more broadly, teachers, school staff, and parents must all take active roles.

Concluding Comments

LSCs are no longer the new, hot topic in educational reform. It is only the occasional story about graft, corruption, or serious conflict that now seems to revive public attention. Unfortunately, this obscures the significant contributions that thousands of LSC members are making, sometimes at a significant price to themselves and their families. These individuals deserve our praise and our thanks. We need to remind ourselves that what we bring public attention to signifies what we value. In this vein, it is troublesome that the constructive efforts of so many go unacknowledged.

Finally, we view the findings presented here as largely validating the wisdom of the 1988 Reform Act. By devolving significant resources and authority to local school communities and by expanding opportunities for local participation by parents, community members, and staff, this reform has enlarged the capabilities of school communities to solve local problems.

Many school communities—including many poor, minority, and disadvantaged communities—have used these opportunities wisely to advance improvements in the schools. Some, however, have been left behind. Thus, these findings also validate the need for increased oversight of LSCs that lies behind provisions of the 1995 Reform Act. A small fraction of school communities are deeply troubled and appear, for the moment at least, unable to govern themselves productively. If there is to be any real hope of advancing educational opportunities for the children enrolled in these schools, external accountability and thoughtful external intervention is required. The effectiveness of these new oversight powers in addressing the problems of non-functional LSCs, without hampering those that are functioning effectively, merits further study. A concern for advancing opportunities for all Chicago's children remains the common standpoint that unites all of its reform efforts.

ENDNOTES

I. Introduction

[1] Because of the unique nature of Chicago's Local School Councils, no existing survey was suitable to use. Many items were written specifically for this survey; others were drawn from previous Consortium surveys of principals and teachers. The instrument was pilot tested twice with selected LSC members and revised for clarity and length. School staff, school reform groups, and civic organizations, through the Consortium's Constituent Advisory Board, also provided feedback. The final survey consisted of 204 items. To encourage LSCs to participate, letters of endorsement from Consortium directors, the central office, and the Chicago Association of Local School Councils were sent to LSC chairpersons and principals.

For schools in the probability sample (31 high schools and 80 elementary schools), the Consortium recruited and trained a field staff to administer the survey. Compared with other Consortium surveys of principals, teachers, and students, LSC members proved a difficult population to survey. Several phone calls and letters were often required before a date to administer the survey was secured. On many occasions, these plans had to be rescheduled. In some cases, we went to schools as many as five times. When we determined that full LSC participation was unlikely, we shifted attention to gathering data from at least the principal and the LSC chairperson.

[2] In comparing school-level indicators, a set of role adjustments was introduced to take into account the different role composition of council members who responded from each school. Thus, the reported school indicators represent the expected results from each school if the full council membership had responded to the survey. See Ryan (Forthcoming) for further details.

[3] Ogawa and White (1994).

[4] See Davies (1979), Malen and Ogawa (1988), and Smylie (1992).

[5] See Putnam (1993) and Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls (1997).

[6] For example, a five-year longitudinal study by Smylie, Lazarus, and Brownlee-Conyers (1996) found significant relationships between regular and inclusive teacher participation in school-level decision making and instructional improvement and gains in student standardized test scores.

This study pointed to the importance of collaborative decision-making processes, principal leadership to support participation, and a focus on mission, curriculum, instruction, and staff development. The study also illustrated the importance of stability in system leadership and the role of the central office in supporting participative bodies, particularly through providing professional development and overarching system goals to focus school-based efforts (see also White, 1992). It is important to note that in this study—and in most others that find positive relationships between school-based participative decision making and improvement in instruction and student learning—the participative bodies being examined are professionally based. That is, these bodies are dominated by teachers and are seen primarily as vehicles for teacher involvement, not parent or community involvement, in school governance.

[7] For a recent review that describes characteristics and limitations of the literature on participative decision making, see Smylie (In press).

II. How Qualified Are Parents and Community LSC Members to Govern Local Schools?

[1] LSC elections have been moved to the spring so that LSC members can receive training before their duties begin. The elections are held on a report card pickup day to make it more convenient for parents to vote.

[2] Data for educational attainment for Chicago and the United States are taken from the 1990 U.S. Census [CD-ROM].

[3] In order to summarize the responses about occupations, we coded the members' responses into the seven major occupational groups developed by the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census.

[4] The survey asked members, "Do you have a job at this time?" This category therefore includes both retired and unemployed LSC members, without distinguishing between them.

[5] See Hinspach, Easton, Ryan, O'Connor, and Storey (1994).

III. Are LSCs Viable Governance Institutions?

[1] Because we promised confidentiality to Local School Councils, pseudonyms are used.

[2] Bryk, Easton, Kerbow, Rollow, and Sebring (1993), Fullan (1991), and Deal and Peterson (1994).

[3] Council members who said their councils conducted a *very comprehensive* evaluation strongly agree with all of the principal evaluation items. Council members who said their councils conducted a *comprehensive* evaluation strongly agree that the LSC does the minimal requirements and agree that the LSC goes beyond this minimum level by surveying school staff and parents, and offering constructive feedback to the principal.

[4] Principal selection is not included because fewer than half the schools in the sample had selected a principal in the last year and completed that portion of the survey.

[5] The activity index is based on 292 schools for which we had sufficient data. The questions regarding LSC activity

were asked of the principal and LSC chairperson only. Of the 324 schools that returned surveys, 292 returned a principal and/or a chairperson survey. For a similar discussion of LSC activity, see Bryk et al. (1993).

[6] High school LSCs have a student member in addition to the other members.

[7] The school-level scales for the principal evaluation, School Improvement Plan, and budget process were compiled as part of three-level HLM analyses. The first level is a measurement model that incorporates information about the uncertainty in each individual's scale responses. At level 2, we introduced a set of dummy variables that identify the respondent's role. This allowed us to compute at level 3 an empirical Bayes estimate of an adjusted school mean on each measure that corrects for possible missing data from each council. These adjusted school means were then categorized according to the basic definitions presented in Section II. Any adjusted school mean within the bottom two categories was flagged as a possible indicator of a problem.

IV. A Closer Look at Schools with Problem Councils

[1] The "inactivity" and "sustained conflict and unethical behavior" indicators are the same as in Section III. The "productivity indicator" averages council members' responses on the three measures of the council in execution of its annual mandated tasks (principal evaluation, School Improvement Plan, and budgeting) and the self assessments regarding LSC capacity to govern and LSC problems (see Section II). These indicators each were used as outcome variables in a three-level HLM analysis that controlled for the role of the respondent on the LSC. The role adjusted empirical Bayes estimate of the school mean response was used to identify the top and bottom 30 schools.

[2] For "productivity" and "sustained conflict and unethical behavior problems," we compared the top 30 and bottom 30 schools. For "activity," we compared the 12 schools with two or more inactivity indicators to the 136 schools with no activity indicators.

[3] These policies went into effect in the 1996-97 school year. Because the implementation occurred after our survey, we have no evidence about their adequacy or impact. The data presented here are a good baseline for a follow-up study.

[4] Small schools are defined as having fewer than 350 students. For prior findings on small schools, see the following Consortium reports: Easton, Bryk, Driscoll, Kotsakis, Sebring, and van der Ploeg (1991); Bryk et al. (1993); Sebring, Bryk, and Easton (1995); and Sebring, Bryk, Roderick, and Camburn (1996).

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The data used to prepare this report will be available on a compact disk. The CD also contains the public release data sets from the following Consortium survey reports: *Charting Reform in Chicago: The Students Speak* (1996), *Charting Reform: Chicago Teachers Take Stock* (1995), *Charting Reform: The Principals' Perspective* (1992), and *Charting Reform: The Teachers' Turn* (1991). Included are the SAS programs that read the data; however, the data are in ASCII format and can be read by any statistical package. Anyone interested in obtaining this CD should contact the Consortium on our web site, **http://www.consortium-chicago.org** or through electronic mail, **patjo@cicero.spc.uchicago.edu** or by telephone, **(773) 702-3364**.

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Charting Reform: LSCs—Local Leadership at Work

A Report Sponsored by the Consortium on Chicago School Research

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- Broad access to the research agenda-setting process;
- Collection and reporting of systematic information on the condition of education in the Chicago Public Schools;
- High standards of quality in research design, data collection, and analysis; and
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Researchers from many different settings who are interested in schooling and its improvement come together under the umbrella of the Consortium. Its deliberate multipartisan membership includes faculty from area universities, representative staff from the Chicago Public Schools and the Chicago Teachers Union, researchers in education advocacy groups, representatives of the Illinois State Board of Education and the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, as well as other interested individuals and organizations.

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